



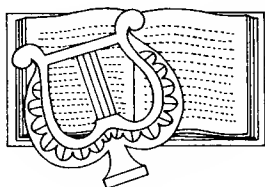
# Guilderoy

By Ouida



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# G U I L D E R O Y

BY

O U I D A



*A NEW EDITION*

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1891



# GUILDEROY

## CHAPTER I.

LORD GUILDEROY had written a few pages of an essay on the privileges and the duties of friendship.

‘Friendship is generally cruelly abused by those who profess it,’ he had written with much truth. ‘It is too often supposed, like Love, to carry with it an official right to that kind of candour which is always insolence. There can be no greater mistake. The more intimate our relations are with anyone, be it in friendship or in love, the less should we strain the opportunity to say impertinent and disagreeable things. Intimacy does not absolve from courtesy, though it is so often separated from it by the unwisdom and the impetuosity of human nature. Indeed, there is even a kind of meanness in taking advantage of our entry into the inner temple of the soul to leave good manners outside on the threshold. Abuse of all privilege is vulgar, and the privileges of friendship, as they are without prescription and left solely to our own judgment, demand an infinite delicacy and forbearance in their exercise. There are many moments in friendship, as in love, when silence is beyond words. The faults of our friend may be clear to us, but it is well to seem to shut our eyes to them. It is doubtful if fault-finding ever did any good yet, or served to eradicate any fault against which it is directed. Friendship is usually treated by the majority of mankind as a tough and everlasting thing which will survive all manner of bad treatment. But this is an exceedingly great and foolish error. Friendship may be killed, like love, by bad treatment ; it may even die in an hour of a single unwise word ; its conditions of existence are that it should be dealt with delicately and tenderly, being as it is a sensitive plant and not a roadside thistle. We must not expect our friend to be above humanity. We need not love his defects, but we should forbear to dwell on them even in our own meditations. We should



not demand from him what it is impossible he should give. A character can only bestow that which it possesses. Time and absence are the enemies of friendship, as of love ; but they need not necessarily destroy it, as they must destroy love. For love is so intimately interwoven with physical joys, that without these it cannot exist eternally ; but friendship, being an immaterial and intellectual affection, ought to be able to endure without personal contact, and to outlast even the total separation of two lives——.'

Having written thus he rose, and paced to and fro his library.

'That is not in the least true,' he reflected. 'It ought to be, but it is not. Between the best friends long absence raises a mist like that which the Brahmin magician calls up to conceal himself. Behind the mist the features that we once knew so well grow vague and unfamiliar. Frequent contact is necessary to sustain all sympathy. It is no fault of ours ; it is due to our imperfect memories, and the change which comes over our minds as well as our bodies with years.'

He did not go back to his writing-table. The glass doors of his library stood open and he walked straight through them. The gardens stretched before them, half in sunshine, half in shadow. Broad lawns, clumps of rare evergreens, stately trees, beds of flowers which had something of an old-fashioned carelessness and naturalness in their arrangement. The distance was closed in by high, close-clipped box hedges, relic of the days of Queen Anne. He strolled out into the warm moist air along the terrace of roses which stretched before this wing of the house. The roses were all tea-roses, and the terrace was roofed and enclosed with them ; a few broad stone steps led from it into the garden below ; at either end of it was a great cedar. It was a dreamy, pleasant, poetic place. The house had more stately façades than this ; some of it was regal and very imposing in its dimensions and its decorations, but this side of it was simple, old-fashioned, and charming in its simplicity. It was the part of the house which he always used by preference himself.

Ladysrood had been so called in very distant days of early British Christianity from some miracle of which the memories were lost under the mist of many centuries. It had been the site of a monastery in the days of Augustine and of Bede, and then the stronghold of the race of which its present lord was the sole male representative. The house, as it now stood, had been built in Tudor days, and had had additions made to it under architects of the Renaissance. The Tudor section of it was that which Guilderoy loved and made especially his own ; the Renaissance part of it was left for purposes of stately hospitality

and ceremonial entertainment : it was also in its way beautiful, but he disliked it. He had lived much in Italy, and in these great rooms with their frescoed ceilings, their sculptured cornices, their marble columns, their seemingly endless *coup d'œil*, he missed the Italian sun ; they made him shiver in the grey, damp, gusty English weather. Everyone else, however, admired them immensely, and they helped to make Ladysrood a very noble house, though to its master it seemed a dull one. The gardens were charming, the park was large and undulating, the timber was superb, and beyond the park was wide, heathery, breezy moorland, which stretched westward to the western coast.

He walked along the terrace without any especial aim or object in doing so. The day was late in September, but the air was still warm. The dahlias and china-asters were glowing in their beds, and the salvias, blue and red, made strong bands of colour where the sun's rays caught them. There was a fresh homely scent of damp grass and fallen leaves, and now and then a scent from the sea, which was but a few miles off beyond the woods of the home park.

'It is a dear place,' he thought. He always thought so when he freshly returned to it ; when he had been in it a few weeks it grew tiresome, dull, provincial—yet he loved it always. At times it wore a mute reproach to him for leaving it so often alone there in its stateliness and silence, abandoned to the old servants who had known it in his grandfather's time, and to whom every nook and corner of it, every cup and saucer on the shelves, every lozenge in the casements, were sacred. They opened it all, and dusted it all, and every day let the light stream through the numerous rooms, and galleries, and staircases, and corridors, and watched with vigilance the sightseers who came on the public day to stare open-mouthed at its splendours. No house in England was better cared for in its master's absence than this was, and yet it occasionally seemed to him to ask reproachfully, 'Why leave me so long alone ?'

'How is it ?' he thought, 'how is it that we have lost the art of living in these dear old houses ? Better men than we did it and were not bored by it—did not even know what being bored meant. They were cut off from the world by the impassable roads that were round them. It took weeks to get to London, and was a portentous journey even to the nearest country town ; and yet they were contented, and they were not only contented—they were often cultured scholars, true philosophers, fine soldiers when they had to draw the sword. They had the art of sufficing to themselves, and we have lost it. We are all of us dependent on excitement from without. All that our superior studies and our varied experiences and our endless

travels have done for us is to render us entirely unable to support half an hour's solitude.'

'Is it not so, Hilda?' he said aloud, as a lady approached him.

'As I have not the honour of knowing what you are thinking of, how can I say whether I agree with it or not?' replied his sister.

'It is too much trouble to put it all into words. If you were a sympathetic woman you would guess it without explanation.'

'I am too matter-of-fact to be sympathetic; you have told me so often. All the common sense of the race has concentrated itself in me.'

'A woman with common sense is dreadful,' he replied somewhat peevishly. 'It is an unpleasant quality, even in a man. One's steward always has it, and one's banker, and one's solicitor; but they are none of them people whom one sees with unalloyed delight.'

'They are very useful people,' said the lady. 'Without them I do not know where you would be.'

'Living in a garret in Paris, or in a mezzanina in Venice, with some Jew or some manufacturer here in my place, no doubt. I am not ungrateful,' he replied. 'I was, indeed, wishing that I could live here all the year round, as our great-great-grandfather did in George the Second's days, going out in state with twelve horses and outriders when he did go out, which was once in ten years—'

'You could drive twelve horses if it amused you; but I think it would have rather a circus-look, a *soupeçon* of Hengler. And where would be the devoted rustics, who were ready to drag our great-great-grandfather's wheels out of the mud?'

'Britons still love lords,' replied Guilderoy, 'and will do so even when Mr. Chamberlain, as Pre-ident of the Republic, shall have decreed that all titles must be abolished. The rustic may have ceased to be devoted, but he still likes a gentleman better than he likes a cat. He will pull one out of the mud sooner than he will the other. That is a sentiment in the English breast which has been too much neglected by the politicians. In France, Jacques Bonhomme hates M. le Marquis savagely; but in England, Bill and Jack have a rude unavowed admiration for my lord duke. Hunting and cricket have done that.'

'How well that comes from you, who never cared about either a fox or a wicket!'

'What have my own personal tastes or distastes to do with a national question? I should no doubt have been a much more popular man in the county if I had liked foxes and wickets!

Hunting, to me, seems barbarous, and cricket childish ; but as factors in the national life they have had great uses.'

'You are so very dispassionate that you are intensely irritating,' said his sister. 'Most people adore things or hate things *en bloc*.'

'Happy people!' replied Guilderoy. 'They are never troubled with any doubt or any divided inclinations. It must be delightful to have the world sorted into goats and sheep, into black and white, in that fashion. I should enjoy it. The world to me looks like a billiard-table ; here and there a ball rolls on it, that is all ; the table is perfectly monotonous and profoundly uninteresting.'

'It does not look monotonous to those who play billiards,' she replied. 'What you want to do to give you an interest in existence is to occupy yourself with its games, trivial or serious.'

'I have a great many interests in existence. Of some of them you don't approve ; you think them too interesting.'

'Come and have some tea,' said his sister ; and she walked to the glass doors of the library and entered that apartment and rang for the servant. 'Bring tea here,' she said to the footman who answered her summons ; and in five minutes the tea was brought, served in Queen Anne silver and cups of old Worcester.

## CHAPTER II.

EVELYN HERBERT, LORD GUILDEROY had been born to an enviable fate. A long minority had given him a considerable fortune, and his name was as old as the days of Knut. His old home of Ladysrood had been inscribed in the Doomsday Book, and had never belonged to any but his race. His mother had been a Frenchwoman of high rank, and his father a man of brilliant accomplishments and blameless character. He inherited from his mother a great charm and grace of manner, and from his father a love of learning and a facile and brilliant intelligence. Personally he was handsome and patrician-looking : tall, fair, and perfectly graceful ; and his admirable constitution preserved him safely through the many follies with which he risked the injury of his health. Destiny had been kind—even lavish—to him, and if, with all its favours, he was not a happy man, it was, as his sister told him, most clearly nobody's fault but his own. He could not perhaps have said himself whether he were happy or not. Happiness is a fugitive thing, and not apt to sit long quietly in an arm-chair at the

banquet of life. It is a fairy, which is propitiated rather by temperament than by fortune.

His sister, Lady Sunbury, was a handsome woman ; tall, stately, and imposing. She looked young for the mother of sons who were in the Guards and at Oxford. She had an expression of power and of authority ; her eyes were clear and penetrating ; her mouth handsome and cold. There were many who thought it a pity that she had not been born to the title of Guilderoy instead of her brother--her husband amongst them, because then she could not have married him.

'You are perfectly right ; I know you are always right ; I admit you are ; but it is just that which makes you so damnably odious !' said Lord Sunbury once, in a burst of rage, in his town house, speaking in such stentorian tones that the people passing up Grosvenor Street looked up at his open windows, and a crossing-sweeper said to a match-seller, 'My eye ! ain't he giving it to the old gal like blazes !'

Lady Sunbury, however, never divined that she was called an old girl by the crossing-sweeper under her windows, and her dignity remained unimpaired either by that fact or her husband's fury. She was a perfectly dignified woman. She looked admirably at a state ball : she received admirably in her own house. She would have been admirable in a revolution, in a siege, or in a civil war ; but in the little daily things of life she was not pliant, and she was not what is comprised in the three French words *facile à vivre*. Now to be *facile à vivre* is, as modern existence is constructed, an infinitely higher quality than all the heroic virtues.

'And yet what a good woman she is !' thought Guilderoy often. 'There is something quite pathetic in such goodness being thrown away on such sinners as Sunbury and I ! And to think that if she were only a little less excellent she would have had such a much better chance of succeeding with both of us.'

Yet Guilderoy, who was of an affectionate nature, was fond of her ; she had been very kind to him when he had been a little boy and she a tall girl in the schoolroom ; he always remembered that ; besides, she was the only near relative that he had remaining to him, and he was always pleased to have her stay at his house as she was staying now for a few days on her way to visits in the adjoining counties, even if her arguments and her reproaches, which were invariably tuned to the same key, left him at the end of each of her visits disposed to sympathise with that very uninteresting reprobate, Lord Sunbury.

She was one of those admirably virtuous women who are more likely to turn men away from the paths of virtue than the wickedest of sirens. Her brother was more tolerant of her

sermons than her husband was, or her sons were ; he appreciated the excellence of her motives and the sincerity of her affections better than they did, possibly because he could get away from both more easily than they could. He pitied her, moreover. An intellectual and intelligent woman, she had married a silly man for his handsome person—a folly clever women often commit. A proud woman, she was poor with that most painful of all poverty, inadequate means to sustain a great position ; and a woman of strong affections, she was doomed to see her attachment impatiently received, or as impatiently shaken off, in all the relations of her life, because she had not the tact to control her temper or to resist her love of argument and domination.

‘My dear Hilda,’ he had said to her more than once, ‘it is not enough to be attached to people to secure their affections ; we must suit ourselves to them, we must study them, we must make ourselves agreeable to them. Mr. Morris has said that love is enough, but it isn’t. It is only a bore if it is not accompanied by self-restraint, discrimination, and daily exercise of tact and judgment.’

But he might as well have spoken to the Kneller and Vandyke ladies in his picture-gallery. Lady Sunbury admitted that he was right in principle, but in practice she still continued to irritate herself, infuriate her husband, and alienate her sons, because she could not keep to herself the superior good sense with which nature had gifted her.

‘When there is not a woman in the house one never thinks of tea,’ said Guilderoy, as he took his cup from her.

‘You should have a woman in the house,’ said Lady Sunbury curtly and with emphasis.

He smiled, and walked up and down the library, with his cup in his hand.

‘What an uncomfortable habit you have of walking about !’ said his sister irritably, with the Queen Anne cream-jug in her hand.

‘You think all my habits uncomfortable when you do not think them improper,’ he returned with perfect good-humour.

‘Yes, they are the habits of a man who has lived entirely for himself and after his own caprices.’

‘Possibly.’

He did not care to defend himself.

Lady Sunbury looked at him as he paced to and fro the library floor. She was passionately attached to him, and proud of him, only she could not restrain herself from worrying and finding fault with him, after the manner of women. She was a few years older than he, and her sense of herself as of a female mentor set over him by nature never left her. She had been intensely ambitious for him ; she had believed, perhaps with



reason, that if he had chosen there was no position in the State which he could not have filled, and filled with honour. And here all his life was slipping away from him, only occupied with idle dreams and passions as idle. She shut down the lid of the Queen Anne teapot angrily.

'My dear Evelyn, you have missed your vocation,' she said, with much irritation. 'Every man who does miss his vocation is an unhappy man. He may be to the eyes of others prosperous, but there is a worm which eateth him and leaves him no rest. The worm in you is suppressed ambition. It is a malady like suppressed gout. Nature, circumstance, your own temperament, and all the accidents of birth joined together, which they so very seldom do for anybody, to make it perfectly possible for you to have been a great man.'

Thus she spoke, and her voice emphasised imposingly the two last words.

Her auditor responded languidly :

'I have no ambition, either suppressed or developed, and there are no great men. When a friend of mine said that there were no great men to Mr. Gladstone, he, who probably felt the remark to be personally slighting, replied that there were as many as ever, but that the general level was higher, so that they did not look so remarkable. It is a reply comforting to modern mediocrity. I am not prepared to say that it is a true one.'

'I think it is true, but it is altogether outside my argument. I am saying that you might so easily have been a great man, as great men go in these days ; whether they are really as big or not as they used to be doesn't matter the least ; you might have been as big as any one of them, and you are mistaken if you think that you are not ambitious—you do not know yourself.'

'Know thyself, saith the sage. It is the most difficult and the most depressing of all tasks, and not a very useful one when it is accomplished.'

Lady Sunbury continued, as though he had not spoken, to pursue her theme :

'It is only men in your position who can touch public life without any possible suspicion of their motives. It was the patriotism of the great peers which carried England through her troubles from '89 to '15. It is only men who have already everything which position can give them who can govern with perfectly clean hands, or who can have the courage in a great crisis which is alone born of absolutely pure disinterestedness.

'I have not the smallest qualification for governing anything, not even a dog,' replied Guilderoy. 'All my dogs do

what they like with me—I am positively afraid of displeasing them.’

‘There is hardly anything you might not have been, with your position and your talents,’ continued the lady. ‘You are indolent, you are capricious, and you are very crotchety; but these are faults you might have overcome if you had chosen, and if you had absorbed yourself in public life you would have been a very much happier man than you are.’

‘Public life is not a recipe for happiness—it is worry, nothing else but worry from morning to night, and nobody does any good in it. They are flies on the wheel of the bicycle of democracy; the bicycle is rushing down hill as fast as it can go; no fly will stop it.’

‘No: no fly will, certainly; but when it falls over at the bottom of the hill, the man who will be there ready to pick it up and get into its saddle will be the master of it and of the situation.’

‘That time is far off. It has only just started from the top of the hill in England, and the man who will wait at the bottom will be some soldier who will stand no nonsense, and will set it going again with a bang of his sword. It is always so. I never see any use in fretting and fuming about it. Democracy, after having made everything supremely hideous and uncomfortable for everybody, always ends by clinging to the coat-tails of some successful general.

‘If our aristocracy did its duty——’

‘Oh no, you are wholly mistaken. Those who envy us and hate us would not be disarmed by the spectacle of our virtues were they ever so numerous. I may not have done my duty individually; I do not pretend to have done it; but I think that the Order has, as a collective body, done theirs very admirably, and with exceeding self-denial. Take our House, for example. The popular idea of the House of Lords is that it is a kind of hot-bed for all manner of unjust privileges and abominable sinecures. The country does not in the least understand the quantity of solid useful work which is done there in committee, the way in which young men sacrifice time and pleasure to do that work, and the honest painstaking care for the national interests which is brought to the consideration of every bill that comes up to it. The House of Lords wants nothing of the nation, and therefore it is the only candid and disinterested guardian of the people’s needs and resources. It has never withstood the real desire of the country; it has only stood between the country and its impetuous and evanescent follies. It has given breathing time to it and made it pause before taking a headlong leap, but it has never opposed what it saw to be the real and well-considered national will. It has

done what the American Senate does ; but it has done it better than any elective senate can do, because the moment any political body is elective it has at once a tendency to servility, and is more or less open to cause, and to be acted on by, corruption. As you said yourself just now, it is only men who have already a position so great that nothing can make it greater who can govern public life with no possible taint of ulterior or personal motive. It is because personal motives have crept in so insidiously into English politics that they have deteriorated in character so greatly as they have done in our time.'

'Every word you say only strengthens my opinion that you should have taken a part, and a great part, in national life.'

'You narrow a public question to a private one—women always do. I know myself, which you admit is rare, and I am wholly unfitted for public life as it is now conducted in England ; I have views which would appal even my own party. I think that we should have the courage of our opinions, and that we should not bid for popularity by pretending that the mob is our equal ; we should have the courage to demand that supremacy should go to the fittest, and we should refuse to allow ignorance, drunkenness, and poverty to call themselves our masters. We should declare that the minority is always more likely to be in the right than the majority, and that if generations of culture, authority, and courtesy do not make a better product than generations of ignorance, servility, and squalor, then let all "laws and learning, grace and manners die," since they have proved themselves absolutely useless. But we have not the courage of our opinions ; we are all kneeling in the mud and swearing that the mud is higher than the stars. I for one will not kneel, and therefore I tell you I have no place in the public life of my times.'

Lady Sunbury was vexed and irritated.

'I do not see that your eulogy of the House of Lords is in accord with your condemnation of public life. If you have chosen——'

'I beg your pardon. I say the House of Lords is more admirable and useful than the people have the remotest idea of, who think it only a kind of glass-frame for rearing the mushrooms of prestige and privilege. But I think the House of Lords would be truer to itself if it had the courage to tell the people that it could govern them, were it an absolute oligarchy, with infinitely more honour abroad and prosperity at home than they will ever get out of the professional politicians and the salaried agitators whom it sends up to Westminster.'

'If it did it would be swept away.'

'Is that so sure ? At all events, it would fall with dignity. It is not dignified to pass bills which it knows to be poisonous

to the honour and welfare of the nation, because it has the *couteau à la gorge* of its own threatened extinction. Courage is the one absolutely necessary quality to an aristocracy; and I know not why our House should fear its own abolition. It is the country which would suffer far more than ourselves.'

'Go to the House and say so.'

'The House is not sitting,' he replied with a little laugh, as he rose and walked to one of the windows. Opposite to the window was a great cedar tree spreading its dark shade over a velvet lawn. On one of the boughs of the cedar a wood-dove was perched high up against the sun; the light made the white and fawn of his plumage look silvery and gold; he was murmuring all sorts of sweet things to his lady-love, visible to him though not to his observer; he was perfectly, ideally happy. Round the trees at the same moment were flying three sparrows fussing, shrieking, quarrelling. The foremost had a straw in his beak, and the others wanted it.

'The professional politicians,' murmured Guilderoy. 'The lover is wiser by a great deal.'

'That depends on what sort of person the lady is,' said his sister, with some unpleasantness in her tone.

'Not at all,' said Guilderoy. 'She is to him what he thinks her at all events; who wants more?'

And he continued to watch the dove cooing and fluttering in the sunshine on the topmost branch of the great cedar.

'The dove wants a great deal more if he is wise,' said Lady Sunbury.

'If he is wise he is not half a lover,' replied Guilderoy. 'The sparrows are wise in your sense and the world's, not in mine.'

'I wish you were like the sparrows.'

'You wish I were a professional politician, or a salaried agitator? My dear Hilda, what taste!'

'I wish you were anything but what you are.'

'One's relatives invariably do.'

Lady Sunbury went up to her brother and put her hand in affectionate apology on his shoulder.

'You know what I mean, my dear. You have such talents, such great opportunities, so noble a character. I cannot bear to see them all thrown away on women.'

He laughed and moved a little away.

'Every woman thinks a man's life "thrown away" on another woman; when a man's life is given to herself she thinks it "consecrated" to her. You always use two vocabularies for yourself and your neighbours.'

Lady Sunbury turned away, offended and silent.

Guilderoy still continued to gaze dreamily at the cedar with the birds in it, which had furnished him with his metaphor.

## CHAPTER III.

‘HE really ought to make some marriage,’ thought Lady Sunbury, when she had left him, and took her way through the drawing-rooms opening one out of another in a succession of rooms, all decorated and furnished as they had been in George the Second’s time, and with their ceilings and panels and mantel-pieces painted by the Watteau School.

‘He really ought to marry,’ she thought; ‘it makes me wretched to think that he should go on like this.’

And yet what woman living would have seemed to Lady Sunbury to be the equal of her brother?

She would have been sure that a Venus was a dunce, a Pallas a blue, a Penelope a fool, a Helen a wanton, and an Antigone a fright. All the graces, all the muses, and all the saints rolled into one would have seemed to her either a dowdy or an *écervelée*, either a humdrum nobody or a portentous jade, if such an one had been called Lady Guilderoy. She had a most ardent and honest desire to see her brother married, and yet she felt that his marriage would be quite intolerable to her. For a person who prided herself on her consistency the inconsistency of her feelings was an irritation.

‘I should hate her. I could not help hating her,’ she mused as she walked through the drawing-rooms. ‘But I should always be just to her, and I should be very fond of the children.’

Nothing, however, she knew, could be further from her brother’s intentions than to give her either the woman to hate or the children to adore.

He had seen all the most charming marriageable women of Europe, and he had taken none of them. So far as his life was pledged at all it was given to a woman whom he could not marry.

Guilderoy, left to himself, glanced at his neglected essay lying on the writing-table. ‘What is the use of saying these things?’ he thought. ‘Everything has been said already in the *Lysis*. We keep repeating it with variations of our own, and we think our imitations are novelty and wisdom.’

He threw the written sheets between the pages of a blotting-book, and took up a letter lying under them and read it again; he had read it when it had arrived with all his other correspondence in the forenoon. It was from the lady of whom his sister did not approve.

It was an impassioned letter.

Now, when a man is himself in love such letters are delightful, but when his own passion is waning they are apt to be wearisome.

'How much of it is love?' he thought. 'And how much love of proprietorship, jealousy of possible opponents, pleasure in a flattering *affiche*? God forgive me! I have not the smallest right to be exacting in such matters or hypercritical, and yet it takes so much more to satisfy me than I have ever got in these things.'

He was conscious of his ingratitude.

After all, a great many women had loved him greatly and had given him all they had to give; and if the quality of their love had not been equal to some vague exaggerated impossible ideal which floated before his fancy, it had not been their fault probably; much more probably his own.

He lit a match and burnt the letter, and remembered with a pang the time when a single line from the same hand had been worn next his heart for days after it had been received.

'Why do our feelings only remain such a very little time at that stage?' he mused; and he wondered if the wood-dove in the cedar tree knew these varying and gradual changes from ardour to indifference. He was not actually indifferent. He felt that to become indifferent was a possibility, and when this is felt indifference itself is never far off we may be sure. '*Elle vient à pas lents; mais elle vient.*'

The letter asked him to spend the winter in Naples. He usually spent the winter somewhere in the south, but a vague dislike to the south rose in him before this request.

The sense that his presence there was regarded as a right weakened his desire to go. Like all high-mettled animals, he turned restive when he felt the pressure of the curb. With the reins floating loose on his neck he followed docilely.

'If I do go,' he thought, 'I shall have all my days mapped out for me; I shall be worried if I look at another woman; I shall be told fifty times a week that I am heartless. Perhaps I am heartless, but I think not; and, even if one is, to be told so perpetually does not make one's heart softer.'

Was he heartless?

He thought not; and in this respect he knew his own temperament. He was even more tender-hearted than most men; but he had been spoiled and caressed by fortune, and habitual self-indulgence had made him apt only to consider himself with an unconsciousness which made it less egotism than habit.

He had done some things which were unselfish and generous in an unusual degree; but they had been great things in which the indolence and fastidiousness of his character had been banished



by new and strong emotions. In ordinary matters he was selfish without being in the least aware of it, as indeed happens with the majority of people.

When the letter was burnt he went to one of the windows and looked out. The day was closing in, and the shadows were taking the colours from the autumnal flowers and making the woods beyond look black and forbidding, while a few red leaves were being driven along the terrace under a breeze which had suddenly risen and blew freshly from the sea. A winter here would be unendurable, he thought. It was very many years since he had seen Ladysrood in the winter months. None of the sports of winter were agreeable to him, and he did not care for house parties which required an amount of attention and observance from a host very distasteful to his temperament. He usually came here only when he wished for entire solitude, and the gentry of his county sighed in vain for the various entertainments, the balls, the dinners, and the hunting breakfasts, to which, had Guilderoy been like any one else, the great house would doubtless have been dedicated. But he saw no necessity to so dedicate it. Ladysrood was much isolated, being surrounded on three sides with moorland and on the other side shut in by the sea; and though his distant neighbours would willingly have driven twenty miles to him, he gave them no invitation or permission to do so. The great *fêtes* which had celebrated his majority some fifteen or sixteen years before had been the last time in which the reception-rooms had been illuminated for a great party.

He was an idol of the great world, which always considered him capricious but charming; but his county saw only the caprice and none of the charm, and thought him rude, eccentric, and misanthropical. In his father's and forefather's time the hospitalities of Ladysrood had been profuse and magnificent; the closing of its doors was an affront to the whole country-side, against the unpopularity of which the good sense of Lady Sunbury had in vain often protested.

'I have no desire to be popular,' Guilderoy invariably replied. 'There is nothing on earth so vulgar as the craze for popularity which nowadays makes people who ought to know better only anxious to be fawned on by the crowd.'

"*Vox populi vox Dei*," said Lady Sunbury.

'It always was in the esteem of the vulgar themselves,' replied her brother. 'Myself, I wholly decline to believe that the gods ever speak through the throats of any mob.'

'Can you call your own county people a mob?'

'Oh yes. A well-dressed mob, but a mob decidedly. If you let them in by the great gates I shall go out by the garden-door.'

And they never were let into Ladysrood, infinitely to their disgust. A few men dined with him occasionally, that was all. It was not wonderful that his neighbours thought Lady Sunbury would have been better in his place.

When he looked out on to the terrace now and saw the little red leaves blowing, he rang and ordered his horse. He was fond of riding in the dusk for an hour or two before dinner. But as he was about to mount his horse he heard the sound of wheels coming up the avenue which led to the western door of the house : a *petite entrée* only used by intimate and privileged persons.

'Who can it be?' Guilderoy wondered to himself, for no one then in the county, to his own knowledge, was on sufficiently friendly terms with him to come thither uninvited. A moment after he caught sight in the distance of the invader, and with pleasure and astonishment recognised his cousin Lord Aubrey.

A few moments later he welcomed him at the west door.

'My dear Francis, how glad I am !' he said with perfect sincerity. 'To what good chance do we owe this happy surprise ?'

'If you bestowed a little attention on the politics of your own county,' replied Lord Aubrey, 'you would know that I had to attend a meeting in your own town yesterday. I heard you were here, and I did not like to be so near Ladysrood without passing a night with you. If I had known sooner the date of the meeting I would have sent you word, but it was made a week earlier than I expected at the eleventh hour.'

'I am delighted to see you, and there could be never the slightest occasion to let me know beforehand. Ladysrood is yours whether I am in it or not. Would you like to go direct to your rooms, and I will take you to Hilda afterwards ?'

'With pleasure,' said Lord Aubrey. 'I am hoarse, dusty, and stupid, for I have been declaiming for three hours on policy to some five thousand people of whom four thousand probably would spell policy with an s, if they could spell it at all.'

'Spelling is a prejudice, like a love for ground leases,' said Guilderoy. 'Come and have a bath and forget Demos for a day.'

'You contrive to forget him always,' said Lord Aubrey.

Francis de Lisle, Lord Aubrey, was a cousin-german of Guilderoy's, and some few years older than himself. He was a tall man, with an air of great distinction and an expression at once melancholy and amused, cynical and good-humoured. He carried his great height somewhat listlessly and indolently, and his grey eyes were half veiled by sleepy eyelids, from which they could, however, flash glances which searched the inmost souls of others. He was heir to a Marquise, and had dedicated

his whole life to what he considered to be the obligations of his station. He did not like public life, but he followed it with conscientiousness and self sacrifice. He was not a man of genius, but he had the power of moving and of controlling other men, and his absolute sincerity of character and of utterance was known to the whole country.

'How is your sister?' he asked now, as he came to the tea-room. 'And what are you doing in the west of England in autumn, you who hate grey skies and cold winds?'

'I am delighted to be in the west of England since it affords me a quiet day with you,' said Guilderoy with perfect truth, for he liked and admired his cousin. He had indeed a warmer feeling towards Lord Aubrey than Aubrey had for him. A man who has combated his own indolence and become excessively occupied is apt to have slight patience with a man who has allowed his indolence and his instincts to be the sole controllers of his life. Guilderoy's existence was a union of contemplation and pleasure; to Lord Aubrey it appeared the existence of an unconscionable egotist; and yet he had a friendly regard for the egotist.

'You have much more talent than I have,' he said once to his cousin, 'and yet your voice is never heard by the country;,' and Guilderoy gave him much the same reasons for his silence which he had given to his sister.

'You believe in a great many things, and you care about others,' he added. 'Now I do not believe, and I do not care. Talent, even if I possess it—which I doubt—cannot replace the forces which come from conviction. Those forces I have not.'

'Here is your model hero; the one perfect person endowed with all the virtues and moral conscientiousness in which I am so sadly deficient,' said Guilderoy to his sister, as he entered her presence with his cousin as the sun descended over the western woods.

'I admit that I wish your life were more like his; you would probably be happier and certainly more useful,' said Lady Sunbury as she welcomed Aubrey with more cordiality than she showed to most people.

'I am by no means sure,' said Aubrey, 'that when one does choose Pallas one is always right in the choice, if Hercules were; and if one is as intolerant of being bored as Evelyn is, it is no kind of use to take her; a divorce would be sued for immediately.'

'You do not regret your choice, surely?' said Hilda Sunbury in some surprise. Aubrey always seemed to her to be as absorbed in public life as other men are in pleasure.

'I did not say that I regretted,' he replied, 'but misgivings visit one inevitably. *A quoi bon?* One cannot help thinking

that now and then. I dare say a man of absolute genius does not have that doubt, but when one is a very ordinary personage one must feel now and then that one might as well have enjoyed oneself and let the nation alone.'

'You are too modest; your example alone is of the most infinite benefit. There is something so noble in a man who has nothing to gain and everything to lose devoting himself to political life. It is those sacrifices which have made the strength of England and of the aristocracy of England.'

Aubrey smiled, a little sadly: 'We shall not last very long, do whatever we will.'

'I do not believe the principle of aristocracy will ever die out,' said Lady Sunbury resolutely. 'It is rooted in human nature and in nature itself. All governments drift towards it whatever they call themselves. Even savage tribes have a chief. Where our party has been so culpable has been in pretending to agree with those who deny this. Toryism should have the courage of its opinions.'

'Certainly the first virtue of an aristocracy should be courage,' said her cousin. 'An aristocracy is nothing without it. A democracy in England would have sent a humble deputation and the keys of the Cinque Ports to Napoleon after Austerlitz. What stood against him and prevailed against him were the valour and the stubborn patriotism of the English nobility. Aristocratic governments are often faulty; they may be arrogant, illiberal, prejudiced; they may be so, though they are not so necessarily; but there is one fine quality in them which no democracy ever possesses: they have Honour. A democracy cannot understand honour; how should it? The caucus is chiefly made up of men who sand their sugar, put alum in their bread, forge bayonets and girders which bend like willow wands, send bad calico to India, pay their operatives by the tally shop, and insure vessels at Lloyd's which they know will go to the bottom before they have been ten days at sea. Honour is an idealic and impersonal thing; it can only exist in men who have inherited its traditions and have learned to rate it higher than all material success.'

'I quite agree with you,' said Guilderoy. 'Unless we honestly believe that we are the natural leaders of the nation by virtue of the honour which we uphold and represent, we have no business to attempt to lead it, and we ought not to conceal or disavow that we have that belief in ourselves. Lord Salisbury has been often accused of arrogance; people have never seen that what they mistook for arrogance was the natural, candid consciousness of a great noble that he is more capable of leading the country than most men composing it would be. If a man have not that belief in himself he has no business to assume com-

mand anywhere, whether in a cabinet or in a camp or in a cricket field. I have no sort of belief in myself, and therefore I have always let the State roll on without help or hindrance from me in any way.'

'You may be a hindrance without knowing it,' murmured Aubrey; 'a boulder in a high-road does not move, but sometimes it overturns the carriage as effectually as if it did.'

'By which you mean——'

'That when the Radicals of your country are disposed to point to great landowners who lead their lives to very little purpose except that of their own enjoyment, you, my dear Guilderoy, are conveniently at hand to be pointed at, and to sharpen the moral of their tale.'

'It is wholly impossible for them to know what I do with my life,' said Guilderoy with some anger.

'Clearly; but they judge from what they see; and you may be sure that they lose no time in making your country-side see with their eyes. For aught they can tell, no doubt, you may be visiting prisons like Howard, or capturing slave dhows like Gordon, all the time you are away from England, but they do not think so, and all they tell the county is that you have an immense income, which you don't earn, and that you spend it anywhere sooner than in England. I am not saying that they have any business to make such remarks; I only say that they do make them.'

'Let them make them and be damned!' said Guilderoy.

'With all my heart,' said his cousin. 'Only it is not they who ever are damned; it is always the poor, stupid, hungry, gullible crowd, which is led astray by them, and is made to believe that it would mend matters to burn down great houses and cut down old woods.'

'You are always saying,' continued Lord Aubrey, 'that you wonder why I bore myself with public life. It does bore me endlessly, immeasurably, that I grant; but apart from all other reasons you know, Evelyn, I must consider that men in our position owe it to the country not to leave politics wholly in the hands of professional politicians. The professional politician may be honest, but his honesty is at best a questionable quality. The moment that a thing is a *métier* it is wholly absurd to talk about any disinterestedness in the pursuit of it. To the professional politician national affairs are a manufacture into which he puts his audacity and his time, and out of which he expects to make so much percentage for his lifetime. I say that we have no business, because we are lazy and fastidious, to let the vast mass of the uneducated and credulous who make up the mass of our nation be led by false guides, who only use them to climb up on their shoulders to power. If we found a man persuading a

child to eat poison by telling him that it was honey, we should be as guilty as the intending murderer if we did not strike the cup down and tell the child of the danger it ran. That poor, overgrown, ill-educated child, the people—the People with a big P—is always having poison thrust on it under the guise of honey. If we do not try to show it what the cup really holds, I think we are to blame. That is the feeling which has moved me to endeavour to do what I can. I should be uneasy if I did not do it. After all, one can only act according to one's light.'

'You are a very conscientious man, my dear Aubrey,' said Guilderoy, 'and I admire if I do not imitate you. The overgrown child will, however, always prefer the deceiver, who tenders it the poison, to you who are so careful over its health.'

'That must be as it may,' said Aubrey, 'I cannot help the results. Men never know their best friends in public life or private. That instinct is reserved for dogs.'

'I can well believe that you are indifferent to ingratitude,' said Guilderoy, 'and I am convinced you are the servant of your conscience. But will you tell me how you stand the vulgarity of public life? It has become so hopelessly vulgar!'

'That I grant. And it is just its vulgarity which will, I fear, every year alienate the higher minds from it more and more, and send them instead to their bookcases and their inkstands. I confess when I have shouted for an hour or two on a hustings before a general election, I have felt myself on no better intellectual level than a Cheap John. To be compelled to "go on the stump" is a prospect which may fairly make a man who has any refinement or delicacy about him shun political life as he would shun a collier's pot-house. There is too great a tendency to govern the world by noise.'

'On the whole I think I have the better part,' said Guilderoy.

'So far as your own ease goes, not a doubt of it.'

'Evelyn does not admit that there is such a thing as duty,' remarked Lady Sunbury from her tea-table.

'I do not like the word duty,' said Guilderoy. 'It is puritanic and illogical. If we are what science seems to prove, mere automata formed of cells and fibres accidentally meeting, we clearly are wholly irresponsible creatures. Nero is as innocent as St. Francis.'

'What a shocking theory!'

'As shocking as you please. But it is the only logical outcome of the conclusions of physiology.'

'I do not enter the lists with physiology,' said Aubrey, 'but it may say what it will, it cannot prevent my consciousness of an Ego which inclines to evil, and an Ego which tells me to avoid it. It is nothing very great to claim. A dog has it. He



longs to steal a bone and he refrains from stealing it ; he longs to bite a hand which hurts him and abstains from doing so if he finds the hand is a friend's. I do not think conscience is exclusively a human possession, though it may have become larger in human than in other animals. But it is strong enough in me to make me sensible that I am in a very great measure responsible for my actions, and all the philosophies on earth will never talk me out of that belief.'

'And the belief has sent you to the House of Commons?'

'Just so ; I admit the bathos—I admit the justice of your implied satire. But I go to the House of Commons because, feeling as I feel, I should do violence to my conscience not to go to it. That sounds horribly priggish, but I cannot express what I mean otherwise.'

'I wish the country had a great many more men who felt like you,' said Guilderoy.

He walked about a few minutes restlessly, then, his sister having left the room, he asked with some abruptness :

'You came last week from the Veneto? Did you see the Duchess Soria?'

'Yes, I saw her. She wondered very much not to see you.'

'Did she say so?'

'She said so with considerable bitterness. Why were you not there?'

'I do not care to do what I am expected to do,' replied Guilderoy with some impatience and some sullenness. 'There can be no pleasure where there is no *imprévu* ; where there is nothing voluntary. Women never understand that. Half the passions of men die early because they are expected to be eternal. Half the love which women excite they destroy because they stifle it by captivity in a hot-house, as a child might kill a wild bird.'

Aubrey looked at him with some amusement.

'You are undoubtedly right. Even I, who have no pretensions to much experience in the soft science, am aware that you are most undeniably right. But how do you propose to get any woman—and any woman in love—to understand that?'

'I do not even hope it,' replied Guilderoy, wearily. 'I only remark that the utter inability of women to understand it brings about their own unhappiness much sooner than it would otherwise come to them. If they comprehended that the bird wants fresh air, he would very possibly often return of his own goodwill to the hot-house.'

'And tell the tale of his *amours en voyage*? My dear Evelyn, the lady would have to be as wise as Penelope and as amorous as Calypso to receive him on such terms.'

'It would be love ; whereas now it is only love of possession.'

'You certainly ask a great deal of love, and seem to me inclined to give very little.'

'One can only give what one has. Women reproach us with ceasing to care for them. Is it our fault? We cannot control impulse.'

Aubrey looked at him once more.

'Poor women!' he said, involuntarily.

Guilderoy moved impatiently.

'There is no doubt of the Duchess's devotion to you,' added his cousin. 'On my honour, I think she suffers a great deal. She has been a coquette, no doubt, but she has never been a coquette with you.'

'I do not think we ought to speak of her,' said Guilderoy.

'Certainly not, unless you wish it. You introduced her name first.'

'My dear Aubrey,' said Guilderoy with some violence, 'of all intolerable things on earth a passion which survives on one side and dies on the other is the worst. There is no peace possible in it. You feel like a brute, whilst honestly you are no more to be blamed than the sea is to be blamed because after high tide its waters recede. No man is accountable for the flow and reflow of his own emotions. Women speak as though the heart were to be heated at will like a stove or a bath. Now, of all spontaneous, capricious, changeable, and ungovernable things, the passions are the most wayward and the least reasonable. Why do you love? You cannot say. Why do you cease to love? You probably cannot say either. The forces of your emotions and desires are wholly beyond your own control. They are not electric machines—mere Leyden jars which you can charge at will. Why then is it a reproach to cease to love? It is as involuntary as it was to love at all in the beginning.'

Aubrey smiled a little dubiously.

'Excellently reasoned! I should be disposed to admit your arguments, but I doubt very much whether the Duchess Soria would see the force of them.'

'You think she was annoyed that I was not there?'

'She was much more than annoyed; she was indignant and wounded. That was easy to see. She is not a woman who cares to conceal what she feels. Why were you not there, by the way?'

'I dislike everything which is made an obligation—I told you so. What is feeling worth if it degenerate into a habit?'

'All feeling runs to seed in that fashion, unless it is broken off sharply whilst it is still in blossom: a painful fact, but a fact. Here and there perhaps there is a sentiment strong enough to endure through all the changes of its growth, so that instead

of decay it reaches almost perfection ; but it is very rare, and can only be the issue of an unique character.'

'The ideal love, of course, does so ; but it does not exist out of the dreams of boyhood and of poets,' answered Guilderoy impatiently. 'There is attraction, and there is its reaction ; and between the two the time is more or less short, according to temperament and circumstances. But the end is always the same.'

'What you call attraction I should not call love ; I should give it an uglier name.'

'Give it any name you like ; it is all there is. It becomes poetic, however, in poetic natures.'

'My nature is absolute prose, so I cannot pretend to understand,' said Aubrey ; but, although he said so, it was not quite so sincerely spoken as was his wont. He had a vein of romance in his character, beneath the coldness of his exterior and the prosaic nature of his occupations. When he had been quite a boy he had made a secret marriage from pure love. It had lasted a brief space, and had ended ill. The woman for whom he had sacrificed much had been false to him in a gross and brutal intrigue. He had not made his wound public, and she had died not long after his discovery of her infidelity. No one had been aware of this unfortunate drama in his life, but it had made him at once indifferent to women and sympathetic with all sorrows of the affections. He never laughed at those who suffered. His own wound had healed, indeed, long ago, but now and then a nerve still thrilled under the remembrance of its pain. Love had little place now in his busy and laborious life, but his estimate of it was higher than his cousin's, the doors of whose life stood wide open to it all seasons through. If there was anything in human nature which made him irritable, it was to hear men speak of the passions of life as Guilderoy spoke of them. 'If they are playthings they are not passions,' he was wont to say, 'no more than the fireworks on the *Ar de l'Etoile* are the flames of the Commune.'

For errors which were the birth of passion he had infinite sympathy, but with the mere caprices of the senses and the fancy he had little patience.

'He should marry,' said Lady Sunbury to him of her brother, repeating her favourite lament.

Aubrey laughed.

'I should certainly pity his wife,' he replied.

'Why?' said Lady Sunbury, irritated. 'She would have a very agreeable position.'

'Oh, no doubt,' assented Aubrey. 'If she were satisfied with position. Perhaps she would not be.'

'Women are not romantic nowadays,' said his cousin, in the

tone with which she would have said that women did not wear patches.

'I suppose that there are as many—or as few—*âmes d'élite* now as then,' replied Aubrey. 'There never can have been very many. Why should you want him to marry?' he continued; 'you know you would hate a saint if he married her.'

'I am sure I should be delighted,' said Lady Sunbury, and was fully persuaded that she spoke the truth.

Aubrey smiled.

He spent that day at Ladysrood, and then took his departure for his own place—Balfrons, in the north. Balfrons was a mighty border castle which had withstood raids and sieges from the days of Hotspur, and it gave its name to the Marquisate which he would inherit on the death of his father, already a very old man of feeble health, who was but seldom seen by the world.

'I wonder what he would do with his life if he allowed himself to do what he wishes?' said Guilderoy, when his cousin had gone.

'He would never leave Balfrons, and he would collect early Latin manuscripts of Virgil,' replied Lady Sunbury.

'Almost as dreary a paradise as his present purgatory.'

'That is a matter of taste. You prefer to collect a number of erotic memories which soon grow as fusty to you as if they were used tea-leaves.'

'They are at least as amusing as old Italian manuscripts.'

'Not as harmless,' said Lady Sunbury.

## CHAPTER IV

THE next day, after his cousin's departure, very early in the forenoon Guilderoy rode out whilst the day was still young. Riding was the only active exercise which pleased him; he rode well, and with great boldness and sureness; his sister sometimes told him that it was the only English taste he possessed. He could ride many miles without passing the limits of his own land, and much of this was the wild moorland lying high and wind-blown between the woods of Ladysrood and the cliffs by the sea. Over the short elastic turf he could gallop for hours and meet no fence, or boundary-mark, or human habitation. The western wind came straight in his face from the Atlantic, and there was nothing but salt water between him and the coast of Maine. The world had been too much with him to leave him great leisure for the enjoyment of nature, but he had a vague

feeling for her which resisted the opposing influences of the world, and revived in the force it had had in his boyhood whenever he was alone in the open air, on moor or shore or mountain.

The moor and the shore and the mountain could not hold him very long, but, while it lasted, his sympathy with them was sincere and his pleasure in their loneliness very real. It was not the love of Wordsworth or of Tennyson, but it was genuine in its kind, and gave momentary seriousness and romance to his temperament and his thoughts. In the heart of a man who loves nature there are always some green places where the caravan wheels of the world have not passed or the hoofs of its carnival coursers trodden.

It was so seldom that he saw anyone or anything on these moors beyond a pedlar or a turf-cutter, a carrier's cart creeping slowly across the track which led from one hamlet to another, or a cottager carrying on her head a bundle of cut furze or a basket of bilberries, that he looked curiously at a little crowd of people which he saw on the edge of the moor, their figures black against the light of the sky. From them, as he drew nearer, there came to his ear an angry screaming noise, the ugly noise of irritated roughs, and he could distinguish the uncouth figures of village lads about whom several lurchers and other dogs were jumping and yelping excitedly. The centre of the excitement was a hut or cabin made of wattles such as was used by the turf- and bog-cutters of the moors; generally such places were only used for shelter in bad weather, but this one was stronger than most, and braced with beams, and had a door of wood, having served as the home of some squatters at one time, though of late it had been empty.

'They are after some barbarous sport or another,' thought Guilderoy, as he heard the hoarse shouts. 'Torturing some beast, very likely, or perhaps some half-witted human creature.'

He turned his horse to the left and rode towards the little mob, which was a very rough one, composed chiefly of lads from the other side of the moors, where the scattered and uncared-for people were more savage and uncouth than those on the domains of Ladysrood.

'Let un fire her out!' he heard one of them cry, as he rode nearer, and the welcome shout was echoed with noise and glee. 'Let un fire her out! Let un fire her out!'

'Who is she?' asked Guilderoy, 'and what are you going to do? What do you mean by your threats about fire?'

The ringleaders looked at him sullenly.

'Tis the lord,' they muttered.

They were some score in number, lads ranging from fifteen to twenty, beetle-browed, coarse-featured, with jaws like their own bulldogs, and small dull savage eyes, items of that en-

lightened and purified democracy to which is henceforth trusted the realm of Britain.

It was a Saturday morning, and they had nothing useful to do, and so were doing mischief.

'What are you about?' asked Guilderoy again, more imperiously.

What struck him as singular was that whilst the young men and their dogs were in uproar, jostling, hallooing, swearing and yelping, from the hut not the faintest sound came.

'Have they frightened to death whatever it is they are persecuting?' he thought, with difficulty keeping his horse quiet amidst the hubbub and the menacing gestures of the youths.

'What are you about?' he demanded; 'answer me at once. What devilry are you doing?'

He had little doubt that they had hunted in there some poor old creature whom they thought a witch. Witchcraft was firmly believed in on the moors, and often rudely dealt with by village superstition.

Their clamour ceased a little while, and one of them called to him:

'She's shut herself in with it, and it's ours, and we're going to burn 'em both out; she's kept us here fooling us three hours.'

'What is it? and who is she?' asked Guilderoy, and he struck with his riding-whip out of the hand of the man who spoke a wooden box of lucifer matches. There was a quantity of dry furze already piled against the wall of the hut, which if set alight would have flared like straw.

They did not reply, but some of them roared like animals deprived of prey which they had thought safe in their jaws.

'Answer me,' he repeated; 'you know who I am. I have a right to be answered, you are on my land.'

'Tis a tod,' one of them shouted, 'and we turned it out to hunt it with the dogs, and we'd run it into a cranny, and she come up and catch hold of it and tear away, and we hunted of *her* then, in here, and she's fleet of foot as any hare, and she lied in quick as thought, and banged the door, and barred it, and she's kept us, making fools of us, three hours if one, and she knows we'll burn her out, and she won't give it up, and she knows we bought it at the public at Cherriton for we told her so, and brought it in a bag and turned it down, only it run bad because it's such a little un.'

'You have lost a fox-cub, I understand,' said Guilderoy when the narrator ceased. 'But who is it that you have in there, and that you are brutes enough to want to burn out?'

'It's the young un of Christ'slea,' said the youth sullenly.

'Who do you mean?'

'Tis the Vernon girl,' cried another of the rioters. 'She's

a spirit she have, but we'll break it. We'll have the tod if we have him roasted.'

'You unutterable beasts !' cried Guilderoy, in the passion which cowardice and tyranny together rouse in a man who is both courageous and merciful. 'Do you mean to say that there is a child or a girl in there ?'

'She went in with the tod,' said the lad sullenly ; and those around him yelled in chorus, 'How dared she go and take the beast and spoil our sport ? The tod was ours, not hers. And she cuddled it up in her neck as if it was a baby. We'll burn her out, and then we'll toss up for her,' cried another voice, and the suggestion was received with shouts of applause.

'You are on my land, and I am a magistrate,' said Guilderoy, controlling with difficulty his fury of disgust as he dismounted, and, holding his plunging horse with one hand, with the other struck the handle of his whip on the door of the hut.

'My dear, do not be alarmed,' he said to the unseen occupant within. 'These brutes shall not hurt you. Open the door. I will take care of you. I am Lord Guilderoy, and these moors are mine.'

A very clear young voice with a tremor in it answered through the door :

'I cannot open it, because if I do they will take the little fox.'

'No, they shall not take the cub,' said Guilderoy, and he turned to the men. 'You have behaved worse than your mongrels, but I will consent to believe that you would have failed to carry out your dastardly and brutal threats. There is a sovereign for the loss of the cub ; now go back to wherever you came from, and do not forget that your miserable sport is illegal on these lands. Go !'

The little mob wavered, growled and swore under its breath ; then one of them picked up the gold piece where it lay on the ground to slink off with it unremarked.

'Share fair !' yelled the others, and they fell on him, and wrestling, quarrelling, yelling, and casting shamefaced and sullen glances over their shoulders at 'the lord,' they slunk away across the moor in the warm amber light of the full noon-day.

The ground sloped slightly downwards to the north-east, and thither they went ; the rise soon screened their forms from view, though the echo of their voices in rough and fierce dispute came to the ear of Guilderoy as he stood by the cabin door.

'Admirable persons to have been made our masters by Act of Parliament !' he thought, as the sullen mutterings of their oaths came to his ear on the westerly wind.

Then he turned to the door of the cabin and rapped on it with the handle of his whip.

‘The brutes are gone,’ he said through the keyhole. ‘You may come out quite safely.’

He heard a wooden bar lifted and dropped; the wooden door opened, and on the threshold in the warm glow of the sun stood a young girl with a very beautiful face, which was pale but resolute; a Gainsborough face with wide opened questioning eyes and tumbled auburn hair, of which thick waves were escaping from a gipsy-shaped straw hat. A grey woollen dress was fastened round her waist by a leather belt; it had been obviously made by some simple country sempstress, but there was an aristocracy in the look of the wearer which made him feel that, whoever she might be, she was thoroughbred. She was not nervous or agitated, only pale. She had placed the fox-cub on the ground that she might undo the bar of the door, and the little animal was shivering and trembling behind her. She took it up before she spoke to him.

‘You are sure they are gone?’ she asked, looking out across the moor.

‘Perfectly sure,’ returned Guilderoy. ‘But, my dear child, did you not hear them? They were inciting each other to fire the hut.’

‘Oh yes, I heard them,’ she replied tranquilly. ‘I think they would have done it too. They are very rough and savage, those Cherriton people. It was very kind of you to interfere.’

‘And what would you have done if I had been riding another way, and if the fellows had carried out their word? You would ten to one have been burnt alive.’

‘Oh, perhaps not,’ she answered. ‘I daresay they would not have let me be really burnt, they only wanted to frighten me.’

‘And you would have run the risk rather than give up that cub?’

‘Oh yes! I could not have given him up; and, besides, I would never have given in to *them*.’

Guilderoy bowed to her with grave respect.

‘You have a great courage, and you have another quality growing rarer still—scorn for the mob.’

She did not reply to the words.

‘I will go now,’ she said; ‘and I thank you very much, though I do not know who you are.’

‘I am a neighbour of yours, I think. I live at Ladysrood.’

‘Ah, I heard them say “It’s the lord.”’

She looked at him with more attention and interest than before.

‘Ladysrood is such a beautiful place, they say,’ she said.

‘But you are never there. Why are you always away?’

‘I really hardly know,’ he replied; she seemed to him too



young to be answered with a compliment. 'You see the English climate is so detestable. I dislike rain, and there is scarcely anything else here.'

'I do not mind rain at all,' she said as she left the cabin, still clasping in her arms the draggled and shivering fox-cub.

'Pray do not come with me. Our place is ten miles from here.'

'Neither my horse nor I mind ten miles,' replied Guilderoy, 'and I most certainly insist on being allowed to attend you to your father's gates. Let me carry the cub for you. How is it he is so tame?'

'They take little foxes from their earths and bring them up; and then, when they are a few months old, they are carried out to some waste place and hunted with dogs; not hounds, you know, but any kind of dog. I could tell this was a tame cub by the way it behaved. It did not know how to run; and was not even afraid. The young men chased it and lashed it, and threw pebbles at it to make it run, but it did not know how. Then, when I saw that it got behind a stone, I took it up and would not let them have it, and I ran as hard as I could, and they ran after me. I got in there just in time to bar the door. Men are so mean,' she continued, with the same scorn in her voice. 'There was a fox—a grown fox—that the real hounds hunted last year, and he ran down to the shore and took to the sea, and swam—oh, so gallantly! The hounds could not get him nor the hunters; but what do you think some men did who were in a boat, and saw him? They rowed so that they crossed his path, for he was making for a tongue of land, and they beat him to death in the sea with their oars—the cowards! That I saw myself, for I was up above on the cliffs, and I could not do anything to save him.'

'Men are very ignoble; and the new worship of humanity has a beast for its god,' replied Guilderoy.

She went on walking, holding the little fox to her with both arms. Guilderoy walked beside her, with the bridle of his horse over his arm.

'But how can your father allow you to wander about so far all alone?' he asked, looking at the profile of his companion, and thinking of Romney's Emma Hamilton, which it resembled.

She laughed; a child's careless laughter.

'I do not think he even knows I do roam about: he is so much absorbed in books and papers. He is so good to me—oh so good! but he would never think to ask where I was all day; and, besides, the moors are as safe as our garden. Nothing has ever happened till to-day; and to-day the men would not have annoyed me if I had not taken away their cub. Of course I had no business, really, to take it.'

‘Why did you, then?’

‘Because I would much sooner do wrong—yes, even a crime, I think—than see any helpless little thing hurt. Would not you?’

‘Yes, I would, certainly; I like animals. They are great mysteries; and men, instead of endeavouring to win their way into their closed souls, have only beaten the owners of the souls into captivity.’

The girl paused a moment, and looked at him earnestly.

‘I like you very much,’ she said with gravity, as a child of five years old might have said it.

‘I am exceedingly pleased,’ said Guideroy, inclined to smile; for he was adored and flattered by all women of the great world, and used to the most subtle compliment, the most charming homage. ‘You have not told me whom I have the honour of speaking to. May I ask what is your father’s name?’

‘Our name is Vernon. Vernon of Llanarth.’

‘Is it possible that your father is John Vernon of Llanarth?’ he asked, in intense surprise.

He remembered the name, though vaguely. When he had been a very young man the story of Vernon of Llanarth had been the theme of society for a season. He had forgotten it utterly for years; now its memories rose before him, shadowy, but full of reviving interest.

‘Yes, he used to be rich, but he lost all his money. It is many years ago. I do not remember his being rich at all. You seem surprised. Did you never know that we were here, then? We are your tenants, I think.’

‘I know so little of the neighbourhood.’

‘Yes; and my father says it is very wrong of you. He says you play into the hands of democrats; that at the Radical meetings in the great towns they always cite you as an example of those who have all the fruits of the land without toiling for it, and take their substance from the poor to spend in foreign countries. Why do you?’

‘I did not look for a political lecture,’ said Guideroy. ‘I am always having one at home from my sister, and I am not aware that I take any substance from the poor. I believe, on the contrary, that the poor are better off on the lands of Ladysrood than they are anywhere else in the south-west of England. Is it possible that your father holds these opinions? The Vernons were always Whigs, but never Radicals.’

‘He does not hold them. He is sorry that anyone holds them, and he is sorry that the great nobles who stay away from their estates, as you do, give agitators an excuse to make the people hold them.’

‘I am not sure that my example would be more edifying if

I lived on them. If you will not let me carry that poor little beast for you, will you let me mount you in my saddle? You are tired, though you will not own it, and you will be able to carry the cub much more comfortably for himself, which is no doubt the argument which will have most weight with you.'

It was not easy to persuade her, but she did at last consent, and sprang with rapidity on to the horse's back, scarcely touching Guilderoy's hand. He put the little fox up in the saddle in front of her, and, thus laden, the horse paced slowly over the elastic turf, his master walking at his head.

'What a beautiful child!' thought Guilderoy, as he studied her features and her form. She was tall and lithe, and admirably made, like a young Diana; her feet were small and slim, her throat beautifully set upon her shoulders, all her features were harmonious, and her eyes were so large and lustrous that they would have made a plain face handsome; her expression had a curious mingling of innocence, self-will, candour, pride, intelligence, and childishness; her smile was like sunlight, frank and lovely.

'In a year or two she will be the most beautiful woman in England,' he thought, 'and what a fine character, too!'

He was not in the habit of noticing young girls at all. He, on the contrary, shunned them. He liked women who amused him, who could treat him *de puissance à puissance*, who could bring into their conflicts with him wit, finesse, and experience. This was the first very young woman of his own rank at whom he had ever seriously looked, and there was something in her which charmed and interested him. The tranquillity in danger which she had showed, and the self-possession and simplicity which were characteristic of her manner seemed to him to be the acme of high breeding, whilst joined to them were a *naïveté* and a childishness only possible to one who had led the simplest of rural lives, and been little amongst women.

He knew the name of John Vernon, though ever since his own boyhood it had been unspoken in his world. He remembered hearing what fine scholarship, what rare accomplishments, and what elegant dilettanteism had vanished with this man from society when a total and voluntary loss of fortune had sent him into seclusion and oblivion, by the world forgot if not the world forgetting. And this was his child—it was not wonderful, he thought, if she had rare and delicate excellencies both of form and mind.

'And have you always lived here? and on my land?' he asked her, as he led the horse along through the golden haze made by the morning sun.

'No, only ten years. We lived by the sea, thirty miles away, first of all. That is what I first remember. The sea ran very

high one winter's night and washed away our house, and my father had only just time to save me and some of the books. I can recollect it. They woke me and carried me out wrapped up in the blankets, and I saw the great wall of water rising up above me ; and I heard the crash of the house sinking ; yes, I have never forgotten it. I was five years old. My mother died of the cold of that night, and soon after we came to Christ'slea. My father likes it because it is so solitary, and has such a big old garden. I think we pay you forty pounds a year for it with the orchard.'

'I am shocked not to know my tenants.'

'How should you know any tenant when you are never here?'

'I am here sometimes.'

'Oh, yes, when you have a number of great people, now and then, once in four years. Myself, if I had Ladysrood, I would live there all the year round.'

'How happy Ladysrood and its master would be!'

The compliment made no impression on her.

'I am as happy at Christ'slea,' she answered ; 'but I should like to see your great galleries, and the beautiful ball-room with the frescoes, and that staircase with the carving by Grinling Gibbons—it must be an immense pleasure to own a beautiful old house. I have heard a great deal of yours, though I have never seen it.'

'You will now come and see it very often, will you not?'

'It is a long way off, and I have no pony.'

'I will send you a team of ponies, or I will come and fetch you myself.'

She laughed a little.

'You say that, but you will not do it, because you always go to Italy.'

'Perhaps I shall not go to Italy this year.'

'Then I will come and see you,' said Gladys Vernon frankly.

In such innocent interchange of speech they wended their way across the moor to where the moors became meadow land and orchard land, and a hilly uneven road went up and down between high hedges of bilberry and briony.

'That is our house,' she said, as she pointed to some twisted chimneys and a thatched roof rising above a tangle of apple trees, elder trees, and hawthorn trees. The ground all about was orchard, and the strong sweet scent of the ripe fruit filled the air.

Guilderoy stopped his horse at the little wooden gate which she had pointed out to him, overtopped with luxuriant, unclipped shrubs, between tall privet hedges.

'You are safe now,' he said to her, as she sprung down from the saddle. 'I will bid you good-day here, and will call on your father later. Give him my compliments, and say how much I am indebted to the fox-cub for having led me to the knowledge of my tenants.'

'You have been very kind,' said the girl, with her hand on the latch of the wicket.

'I have been very fortunate,' said Guilderoy; 'but if you will allow me a parting word of advice, do not wander so far alone. It has ended well this time, but it might end not so well. You are too'—he was about to say too handsome, but checked himself, and said instead—'too young to roam about unattended. Demos is about everywhere, you know. By the way, what will you do with your *protégé*, the cub?'

'I shall keep him in the garden.'

'Like Sir Roger de Coverley's hares.'

She smiled as at the mention of a dear old friend.

She gave him her hand with another of those smiles which made her more than ever like the Romney, and disappeared into the green twilight of the untrimmed garden ways behind the wicket.

'What a charming child!' he thought; 'and she treats me much as she might treat the old carrier who crosses the moors, or the huckster who buys the orchard apples!'

## CHAPTER V.

'WHERE have you been, my dear, all these hours?' a voice said from the green twilight of the tangled boughs and bushes.

'That is my father! Wait a moment,' said the girl. And she pushed the branches aside and ran to him.

Guilderoy heard her rapidly narrating her adventure and speaking of him by name; and in a few moments' time John Vernon came through the leaves and the shadows. He was a slight well-made man, with a scholar's stoop in the shoulders, and a scholar's brow and eyes; he was very pale, and his step was feeble, but he had a smile which was infinitely engaging in its brightness, and there was humour, too, about the delicate lines of his mouth; he had once, like Ulysses, known well the cities and the minds of men.

'My dear Lord Guilderoy,' he said, as he stretched out his hand, 'I am infinitely obliged to you for having brought home my truant. She is growing much too old to wander like this,

but I cannot get her to believe it; and her education, in some ways, has been sadly neglected. Come in the house—your house, by the way—and let me understand better what has happened. Gladys has gone to carry this new *protégé* to the cow's stable.'

Guilderoy, won by the tone of the voice which addressed him, followed the speaker indoors, leaving his horse at the gate.

He said something to the effect that whatever the means of education the result obtained was admirable.

'You must not say that,' replied her father, with a smile. 'You are very kind if you think it, for my poor little girl, though she is not unpossessed of some learning, is wholly ignorant of all that a polite society requires in children of her age, and I make no doubt that she treated you with very scant ceremony. I ought, you know,' he continued with a sigh, 'to send her to my people to be instructed in all the decencies of society, and brought out into the world. But I hesitate to do so. The child would be wretched amongst a number of distant relatives. I am poor, as you know. She would have to take the position of a Cinderella, and she would not take it; she is too proud, too used to freedom, and, in her own way, to sovereignty, for she does precisely as she pleases in this cottage.'

'She has an admirable manner,' said Guilderoy, 'only such a manner as high-breeding gives untaught. Is it indeed true that I have the honour to be your landlord, Mr. Vernon?'

'Quite true; and we have had your house ten years; it would not suit many people because it is so far away from civilisation, but it does suit me chiefly for that reason. You appear to be very little acquainted with the extent of your property. It is well that you have so good a steward.'

'I cannot think it safe for her to be alone,' said Guilderoy. 'She has not even a dog with her. Would you allow me to send you a mastiff or a deerhound?'

'There is a dog; we have a fine one; but he had lamed himself, and so was not about with her as usual. No; she must learn to stay within bounds, and pay the penalty of losing the happy immunity of childhood. She will be seventeen in another month. It is your luncheon hour, I imagine. We are primitive people and we dine at this time. If you will stay I shall be very pleased. My old housekeeper can roast a capon, and I have some good Rhenish wine still to offer you. Divitias miserat.'

Guilderoy consented with much more willingness than he displayed to the invitations of the great world.

The dining-room was a small, square plain room, which had been coloured grey by a village plasterer; but John Vernon, in

idle moods, had covered the walls with classical figures drawn in black and white, and it had a look of good taste, enhanced by the old silver plate on the round dining-table and the autumn flowers set in a grey Flemish pot, which filled the centre.

‘When you have only sixpence to spend you may as well buy a well-made thing as an ill-made thing,’ said John Vernon, as his guest complimented him; ‘and if you have only Michaelmas daisies and dahlias to set out, you may as well see that they harmonise.’

He did the honours of his homely table with perfect grace and simplicity. His guest understood whence the girl had taken her high-bred repose. The repast was very simple; a plain soup, fish fresh from the sea, prawns stewed in sherry, and the capon Vernon had spoken of; but he had seldom enjoyed any banquet better. The keen air of the moors had given him an unwonted appetite. Gladys had changed her gown to a frock of white serge, and had tied back her abundant hair with a pale ribbon. She spoke very little in her father’s presence, but she had so lovely a face, with a colour in her cheeks like that of the wild rose, that Guilderoy almost preferred her silence; it became her youth; and the reverence she showed her father was touching and uncommon in days when English girls are chiefly conspicuous by their insolence and their forwardness. However self-willed or high-spirited she might be to others, to John Vernon she was gracefully deferential and submissive in an unusual degree.

He was stirred to a novel sympathy with this lonely, scholarly gentleman, shut away from the world under the boughs of Somerset apple orchards, and the child who had the beauty of the Romney Hamilton and the life of a young peasant. Her personal beauty pleased him; the one as much as the other. She knew nothing of the complications of life; she had lived on these lonely moors, as Miranda on her isle, and she had the intrepidity and the independence of a Rosalind.

‘Are you never dull here?’ he asked her.

‘Oh, never,’ the child answered, with some indignation. ‘There is the garden, and the orchard, and I have a great many books, and I have a boat all my own down on the sands. If people are dull,’ she added with the happy certainty of youth, ‘they must be stupid themselves.’

‘I am often dull,’ said Guilderoy. ‘I do not wish to accept your theory of the cause of it.’

‘Why should you be dull? Have you had any misfortune?’

‘One big one, perhaps.’

‘The death of anyone?’

Her voice was full of ready sympathy.

'Oh, no; only that I enjoyed all things too early, and too completely; a reason with which you would have no patience, even if you could understand it, which you could not.'

'My father says when we cannot have understanding we should at least have indulgence.'

'A gentle doctrine; few practise it. Would you be indulgent to me?'

'Gladys does not understand how you can want indulgence,' said John Vernon. 'The Lord of Ladysrood seems to her to be higher and happier than kings.'

'When will you bring her to Ladysrood?'

'We never leave home.'

'You must make an exception for me,' said Guilderoy, as he saw how the child's face changed in a moment from eager expectation to disappointment.

'We are hermits,' replied Vernon. 'I have forgotten what the outer world is like, and Gladys has never seen a glimpse of it. We count time by the blossoming and the gathering of our rennets and king pippins. There are more unpoetical ways of reckoning its flight. I forgot; we have a sun-dial, but it stands in the shade and is no use to us, like some people's lives to their possessors.'

'Please do not suggest discontent here,' he added in a low tone. 'It is the curse of modern life. As yet it has not passed this little wicket, and I shall thank you not to raise the latch for it.'

'Forgive me,' said Guilderoy; 'I spoke thoughtlessly. I should indeed regret a meeting which has given me so much pleasure if I were the means of letting a snake creep into your orchard grass.'

He found in his host the most captivating of companions. Although long self-exiled from the world, Vernon had lost none of his interest in its changing fortunes; a great scholar, he yet had no disdain for the topics of the hour, and from his solitude under the apple-boughs of his orchard had never ceased to follow with keen eyes the movements and the portents of the political world. He was pleased to find himself once more in the company of a man of the world, and his conversation fascinated and interested his guest in no little degree; it had a flavour as rare and as pure as the old wine which he had brought up from his cellar.

After dinner they sat awhile in the little garden overhung with reddening leaves and full of autumnal blossoms. The sun had come out and shone on the warm, red brick-work of the cottage where the thickness of the ivy parted. Guilderoy was unwilling to take his departure; the scene was novel though



simple, and his newly-made acquaintances aroused his interest. Moreover, John Vernon talked well, with a depth of thought, an aptness of quotation, and a freshness of opinion which had its charm, and would have had it, even had his guest not had always before his eyes the picture of Gladys seated a little way off on a beehive chair, with the head of the lame dog leaning fondly against her knee. With reluctance he left Christselea as the clock in the church tower half a mile off tolled four.

He was pleased, interested, and angered with himself that such a man should have been resident on his own lands so long and wholly unknown to and unnoticed by him. As he rode through the cold, dusky shadows of the moors, fitfully lighted by a moon which played at hide and seek with the clouds, he saw always before him the child's face of Gladys Vernon, with its brilliant resolute eyes, which grew so soft when she looked at her father.

'Since I must marry, why not marry her?' he thought with a complex impulse, made up half of physical attraction and half of a higher admiration.

## CHAPTER VI.

GUILDEROY made a brief apology to his sister for being so late, and sat down to dinner; throughout it he was silent and abstracted. When the coffee had been brought and the servants had withdrawn, he said abruptly as he walked up and down the room:

'You say a woman is wanted in this house. Well, I have seen one whom I shall marry.'

'Good heavens!' cried Lady Sunbury, as she rose from her chair in the intensity of her amazement.

'At least she is a child,' he added.

'A child! I suppose you mean some jest. I am so stupid that I cannot guess the point of it.'

'No; I am not joking at all. I have seen a perfectly beautiful person whom I am disposed to marry. I imagined that you would be pleased,' replied Guilderoy, which showed that, despite his experience in women, he knew but little of their characters.

'Good heavens!' cried Lady Sunbury again. 'Is it a turf-cutter's daughter, or one of the gypsies?'

'No; it is neither. Do not alarm yourself. She is the daughter of John Vernon, a very noble gentleman who has been living here ten years without my knowing it.'

‘As you never take the trouble to visit your neighbours——’  
‘I shall visit one neighbour to-morrow and take you with me.’

‘Good heavens!’ said Lady Sunbury a third time. ‘You actually speak as if you were serious!’

‘I am quite serious.’

He proceeded to tell her the story of the fox-cub and the cabin.

She listened with astonishment in her eyes mingled with a look of strong censure. She saw nothing but absurdity in it. She was a courageous woman and a humane one, but neither quality as evinced in the narrative touched her. It seemed to her high-flown, idiotic, altogether in bad taste.

‘Girls who live with their fathers alone always run so wild and become so queer,’ she said, when he had ended his tale. It was the only remark which she considered it called for from her.

Guilderoy laughed, with some sense of anger.

‘What ill-natured things a woman always contrives to say! I should have thought the fine courage of the child would have pleased you.’

‘I suppose she is pretty?’ she inquired stiffly and with significance.

He laughed again.

‘She is very handsome,’ he answered. ‘You will see her to-morrow. We will go over to Christ’slea.’

‘How very impetuous you are! One would think you were a boy of eighteen!’

‘It is delightful to be stirred to impetuosity. It is a relic of youth. I feel very young since five o’clock this evening.’

‘It is really intolerable!’ said Lady Sunbury; she could not yet bring herself to believe that he was in earnest.

‘You must remember the story of Vernon of Llanarth better than I, since you are older than I. You were in the world at the time and I was a boy.’

‘I have no recollection,’ said his sister coldly, annoyed at the allusion to her increasing years.

‘You will have, if you think a moment. He was a very clever and popular man, a great scholar, and rich; all the family are rich; and he gave up everything he possessed, wholly, voluntarily, and with magnificent magnanimity, to dower the widows and orphans of four hundred men who were drowned by an underground river bursting into a coal mine which he possessed in South Wales. He considered that he had been to blame in never visiting a property which was on a portion of his lands, and that if he had given more personal attention to it

his engineers and superintendents would have been more vigilant, and the catastrophe might not have occurred, as the weakness of the side next the river would have been known and provided for. The mine itself was totally destroyed, of course—an immense loss to him; and he gave up all the rest of his fortune to provide for over a thousand helpless people. Everyone called him a madman; but neither the world nor his family changed his intentions. He disappeared from society, and has maintained himself ever since, I believe, by writing for scientific and historical reviews and other learned works. When I heard his name I remembered the generosity and quixotism of an action which I very much admired in my boyhood.'

'It was no more than his duty,' remarked Lady Sunbury coldly, when his enthusiasm was spent.

'And how many of us do our duty?' said Guilderoy. 'And is it not always easy to find sophistries which will relieve us of it? I do not believe either that it was anything so cold as a sense of duty: it was a gentleman's instinct to suffer anything rather than let others suffer through him.'

The heritage of such fine and sensitive honour as Vernon's seemed to Guilderoy the richest dower that any young girl could bring with her to any race; and he said so with some vehemence and reproach.

'You are always Athenian in knowing what is right,' said Lady Sunbury dryly. 'Certainly you would be the last man on earth to do anything in any way similar.'

'I do not presume to pretend that I should. But if there be one thing which I admire more than another,' said Guilderoy angrily, 'it is men who sacrifice themselves to what they consider the duties of property. John Vernon did it; Aubrey does it; I do not do it because I have neither the force of character nor the strength of belief which would move me to do it. But I admire it; and when I saw John Vernon to-day, I saw a hero.'

'Because the hero has a good-looking daughter!'

'What a disagreeable person you can be, Hilda!'

'When I do not flatter you.'

'No. I detest flattery; when you throw cold water on any rare enthusiasm which may be fortunate enough to revive in one's chilled soul.'

'You are generally enthusiastic when you have seen a new face which pleases you for the moment.'

'Here it was courage which pleased me quite as much as beauty.'

'He has been here ten years, and the cottage is rented at forty pounds,' continued Guilderoy with anger at himself.

'He must have paid me actually four hundred pounds! Good

heavens ! A man to whom I should have been charmed and honoured to give the best estate that I possess rent free !’

‘Many things may happen on our properties that we regret, if we never inquire into what is done on them,’ said his sister coldly.

‘Pray spare me a sermon ; I had one yesterday from Aubrey, and one from this child to-day. After all, Mr. Vernon would certainly not consent to live rent free however much I wished it ; and had I been aware he was there, perhaps he would not have stayed. He will know no one, they say.’

‘All is for the best, no doubt,’ said Lady Sunbury in a tone which strongly suggested the contrary. ‘If he had known the county people like a reasonable being, his daughter would not have been likely to interest you by her adventures.’

When the morning came she declined to go to Christslea.

‘Whatever follies he may commit now or hereafter they shall not have my countenance,’ she said to herself in that spirit of which women of her character consider the display to be due to their dignity and their families. Guilderoy restrained a passionate inclination to use the same language to her that her husband did, and went over to Christslea alone.

Lady Sunbury remained at home, having done what prudence and dignity required of her. Yet she had an uneasy consciousness that more real prudence, if less dignity, might have been shown in accompanying her brother.

She might have prevented or mitigated some folly. Anxiety and apprehension made her restless, and she wandered in a desultory manner, wholly unlike her usual energy and decision, to and fro through the great house which had been her birthplace, from whose future mistress, whosoever she might be, she would exact such superhuman and innumerable virtues.

She could not believe, seriously, that Guilderoy would make himself so utterly absurd as he had threatened, and yet intimate knowledge of his character had told her that on occasion he could be capable of dangerous and incredible *coups de tête* ; a weakness inherited from the warm Gascon blood of his mother’s race.

Indolent, nonchalant, and easily swayed as he was usually, he became at such moments both strong-willed and deaf to all argument and persuasion.

‘Any woman who has to pass her life with him will need the wisdom of the serpent and the gentleness of the dove,’ she thought, mournfully conscious that remarkably few women ever possess either.

Lady Sunbury never perceived why it was that she utterly failed herself to influence the men belonging to her ; but she had much perception into the character of other women, and she saw clearly enough the causes of their failures.

Meanwhile she passed the forenoon pacing up and down the numerous galleries and salons of Ladysrood.

In the middle of the morning she sent for the land steward, and interrogated him as to the occupants of Christslea.

All that he told her only served to make her more angry, because it made the quixotic folly of Guilderoy assume a more possible shape. She heard that John Vernon was of irreproachable character if of eccentric habits, and that the causes of his poverty were of the highest honour to him.

‘There is a child, is there not—a daughter?’ she asked.

‘There is. I have seen her occasionally. She promises to be very handsome,’ replied the steward, wondering whither these questions tended.

‘But very odd, is she not?’

‘Not more so than any young girl must be who is educated by a recluse, and deprived of all the natural amusements and companionships of her age and sex.’

‘I understand,’ said Lady Sunbury, with a shudder.

She could see the girl exactly as she was: a wild creature without gloves, her brain filled very likely with godless philosophies, and her hair never properly brushed; handsome, no doubt, or Guilderoy would never have looked at her or thought twice about her, but untrained, impudent, and irreligious.

Guilderoy meanwhile was riding through the woods and across the moorland to the modest residence of John Vernon.

He was so possessed with one idea, one desire, that the folly of his errand altogether failed to occur to him; the possibility of its end being disappointment and dismissal never passed through his mind. All his life women had taught him and told him that the offer of his hand would be a favour which could only be met by the most ardent gratitude. It was not vanity which moved him, but the sense that he had a great gift to give, and one which no living woman would reject.

As he rode his thoughts grew fervid, and his imagination heated; he saw ever before him the face of Gladys Vernon, and a thousand excited emotions rose in him as he rode through the brilliant wind-moved autumn air.

He was certainly about to commit an unspeakable absurdity in offering his whole future to a child whom he had seen but once the day before. But the absurdity of his intentions did not strike him; he was too enamoured of the poetry and romance of them, and the opposition of his sister had stimulated him to a promptness of action far from common to an indolent and undecided temperament.

When he sent in his card at Christslea, he was at once ushered into the back study, which John Vernon used, a small room made dusky by the ivy which shrouded the window, and

with books lying five or six deep on the floor, while crowded bookcases lined each of the four walls.

'This is very kind to come so soon again to a solitary,' said Mr. Vernon with his pleasant smile.

Guilderoy pressed his hand and answered without any preface whatever:

'It is you who will, I hope, be kind to me. My dear sir, I come to beg from you the honour of your daughter's hand in marriage.'

'What! Good God, are you out of your mind?' cried John Vernon: he fell backward a few paces and stared at his visitor with the blank stupidity of a bewildered and incredulous amazement; he had always heard that his neighbour of Ladysrood was capricious and eccentric. Was he left now, he asked himself, in the presence of a madman?

'It is not complimentary either to her or to me that you should be so greatly astonished,' said Guilderoy with annoyance. 'Allow me to repeat my words. I have come over this morning to solicit the honour of your daughter's hand. My position is known to you, and on my character, though it might not satisfy precisians, you will not find any very serious stain. I venture to think that my proposals may not be altogether intolerable to you.'

'It is not that,' said John Vernon, still breathless. 'It is—it is—the child is a child—she is not of marriageable years, she is a baby—and good heavens! you have only seen her for ten minutes yesterday. My dear Lord Guilderoy, if this be not a joke; if it be not part of some comedy, of some enigma to which I have not the key——'

'Can you suppose that I should insult you by jests on such a subject? I was never more serious in my life.'

'Then I must gratefully and respectfully decline the honour you propose to do myself and my daughter,' replied John Vernon with the tone and air of a person who closes a subject which cannot be reopened.

'Why?' asked Guilderoy coldly.

'Why?'—Vernon repeated the word in vague bewilderment. 'Why? Why, I have a thousand reasons. I have said, she is the merest child. She knows nothing of you; you know nothing of her. How can you ask me why? My dear lord, it is a kind of insanity. I may appear discourteous and ungrateful in declining your overtures so abruptly, but it is in truth a question which does not bear discussion.'

'Every question bears discussion if it carries no insult with it, and you cannot consider that my desires insult you,' replied Guilderoy, who controlled his temper with effort.

'Insult—no. I am sure you do not mean it as that,' said

Vernon, infinitely amazed, troubled, and annoyed. 'But the mere idea is intolerable, insane, preposterous. You were kind to a child yesterday, and this morning you wish to marry her. Good God! it is only a few months ago that she was a baby playing with a toy lamb. My dear Lord Guilderoy, if indeed you are serious, this is midsummer madness. You have eaten of the drug of Love in Idleness, and Titania and her crew have played with you. Go home and laugh at your freak to-morrow, and thank the Fates that I am not a man to take you at your word and keep you to it. Good day.'

'I shall not go away until I have received from you such answer as I wish,' replied Guilderoy. The unlooked-for opposition fanned his new desires into double warmth.

'As a visitor you are most welcome to my house, but it is the only welcome I can give to you,' replied Vernon. 'I doubt my own senses when I think of the things you have said, of the amazing errand on which you have come here. I still feel as if it must be only in jest that you are speaking, some jest of which I am as yet too stupid to see the point.'

'My dear sir,' said Guilderoy impatiently, 'you think me very ill-bred if I could possibly presume to jest on such a subject. I have never seen anyone marriageable whom I admire so much as I admire your daughter, and I told my sister last evening that I should come here to solicit her hand in all seriousness.'

'Her hand! She is a baby, I tell you. A little rustic. A mere country mouse, with not a penny to her fortune.'

'The daughter of Mr. Vernon, of Llanarth, has one heritage at least which kings might envy,' said Guilderoy with his courtliest grace and an accent of reverent sincerity.

'I thank you,' said Vernon with some emotion.

He had never supposed that anyone remembered an act which had always seemed to him very simple and always absolutely enjoined by duty and honour.

'But there is nothing more for me to do,' he added, 'than in all seriousness to reply that I must with regret decline the honour of the alliance which you propose to me.'

The face of Guilderoy flushed with anger and offence.

'I repeat that you cannot refuse to allege your reasons, at least.'

'Certainly not: they are simple and obvious. The child is too young, and you are a stranger to us both.'

'If these be your only reasons they are both defects which time will cure, if you will allow me the privilege of intimacy here.'

John Vernon, vexed, perplexed, and uncertain how to reply to so much persistency, drew lines with a paper-knife on the blotting-paper before him and was silent. He did not approve of

what he had heard of the lord of Ladysrood ; the various stories of the country-side depicted Guilderoy as strange, capricious, and negligent of the duties of his station ; but, on the other hand, he was admired and esteemed in that great world which John Vernon had once known so well, and no graver sins than those of caprice and self-indulgence had ever been attributed to him ; he might have been a voluptuary, but he had always been a man of honour. It was difficult to reject such a suitor, and yet he was wholly determined to reject him inexorably.

‘Give him Gladys!’ he thought ; ‘why, he would tire of her in three days!’

‘I know what you are thinking,’ said Guilderoy abruptly. ‘You are thinking that I should treat her ill. I should not ; I do not treat women ill even when they annoy and weary me. There is not a woman living who could complain of my want of regard for her even when she had lost all power to please me. On your daughter I will make any settlement that you please, and place it entirely out of my power to injure her were I inclined——’

‘To injure her materially—yes, I do not fear that you would ever do that. But there are so many things that none can promise to do or not to do ; we may control our actions but we cannot control our feelings, and we often make others unspeakably wretched through no fault whatever of our own ; against the wounds of the affection no possible guarantee can be ever given ; the laws of marriage are constructed on the absurd idea that it is possible to do so, and that is why marriage is the almost universal failure that we see it is. But you do not want a disquisition, you want an answer. My dear lord, I can only repeat what I said before, that I thank you for the compliment you pay me, that I apologise to you if astonishment made me appear discourteous, but that what you wish is wholly and forever impossible.’

Guilderoy rose and bowed with a faint smile :

‘Forever is a large word. You tempt me to deceive and to defy you, and to endeavour to make what I wish wished also by your daughter against your wish. You refuse me ; but you could not refuse her.’

John Vernon looked up startled and impatient : ‘You mean that you will make love to the child unknown to me ? It is possible. She is not a prisoner. But I doubt very much if, with all your power over her sex and your experience of them, you would be able to persuade her to have any secret whatever from me.’

‘Why force me to try then ?’ said Guilderoy. ‘I come to you in all openness and fairness. If you will let me visit you on the footing of friendship, I will take no advantage of it without



your knowledge and concurrence. But I shall hope, of course, in time to convert you—and her—to my views.'

John Vernon threw his paper-knife down with a roughness rare in so gentle a person and walked to the window. In a few moments he turned to his visitor: 'I suppose it must be as you wish,' he said unwillingly. 'But give me your word that if I admit you here you will take no advantage of it; that you will not see the child out of my presence.'

'I promise that,' replied Guilderoy. And he was himself astonished at the sudden intensity and warmth which his own desires had obtained from the fanning wind of opposition.

'I am perfectly certain that you will not keep in the same inclinations,' added Vernon. 'It is wildly improbable that you should do so, and I cannot permit the mind of as young a girl as Gladys to be disturbed by ideas of which she has no more thought at present than any one of the red deer fawns on your moorlands. I am sure you will understand that I should prefer that you dismissed this strange fancy altogether from your own mind, and accepted once and for all my rejection of your proposals; but, if you will not do that, all I can admit is that you should come here occasionally as my landlord and neighbour without allowing the child to have any suspicion of any ulterior motive in your visits.'

'Your stipulations are humiliating,' said Guilderoy, 'but I suppose I must accept them.'

He was amused despite his annoyance at the unwillingness with which his proposals were received. No one else in all the world, he thought, would have failed to accept them with ardour and gratitude. John Vernon's attitude moved him to respect and esteem. Here was at least one man to whom the good things and the great ones of the world were as dross.

He left Christlea a few moments later without seeking to see Gladys that day.

## CHAPTER VII.

WHEN he met Lady Sunbury in the small Queen Anne drawing-room before dinner she was infinitely too proud and too offended to ask him any question, though inquisitiveness and anxiety were never so strained well-nigh to bursting in the breast of woman. Guilderoy, however, did not keep her very long in suspense.

'You will be very glad for me to pass the winter here instead of in Italy,' he said, as he took his cup of tea. 'That is what I am going to do.'

Lady Sunbury was not glad. Human nature is full of contradictions.

'You will never pass the winter here !' she said, with some violence. 'Never. For you will never keep in the same mood or the same mind for two weeks !'

'I shall keep in this,' he answered. 'And you will oblige me very much if you will drive over to Christsea to-morrow. John Vernon is quite a respectable person, though he has lost all his money ; indeed, more respectable perhaps than if he had multiplied it.'

'And why should I call on Mr. Vernon ?' said Lady Sunbury, holding a feather screen between her and the wood fire with an unamiable and ominous look upon her high straight delicate features.

'Only because it is usual in the conventional state of the world to do that sort of thing,' said Guilderoy carelessly, 'and I shall marry his daughter in February : I told you last night that I should do so.'

His sister was silent for a few moments. Her lips turned pale with rage.

'And I do not even know her !' she said, in a suffocated voice.

'Really that is no one's fault but yours,' said Guilderoy. 'I asked you to drive there this morning and you refused. I do not know her very much myself.'

'You must be mad !'

'So Mr. Vernon said, but I believe not : of course, one can never be quite sure. There are insidious lesions in the brain which do not declare themselves. Many statesmen's actions which appear unaccountable are really caused by unsuspected protognosis—'

Lady Sunbury interrupted him passionately.

'Do you mean to tell me, with all this fooling, that you are about to enter on the most serious act of your life with less consideration than you would show in buying a dog ?'

'It is not so very serious,' murmured Guilderoy. 'It used to be thought so in old-fashioned days, but not now.'

'Do you mean that you marry only to abandon your wife in a week ?'

'Mr. Vernon said three days. Nobody abandons their wife nowadays, I think, except working-men who empty the savings out of the tea-caddy and go off to Australia.'

'If Mr. Vernon, whatever else he be, is a man of the slightest sense, he will forbid so abnormal, so unnatural, so insensate a folly.'

'Mr. Vernon has all the will in the world to forbid it ; but his power is not equal to his will.'

‘What! Does he feel no gratitude, no sense of honour received, no consciousness of the immense compliment you pay him?’

‘You are exacting. You desire him at once to be servile and furious. He was neither. He had an admirable manner, for which I respect him, and a very slight opinion of myself, with which I do not quarrel. My dear Hilda, do not force me to quarrel with *you*. It would be so much to be regretted. I abhor dissensions, and if they are forced on me I do not very soon forget them. If a man, well-born and well-bred, has a charming child, who is both lovely and innocent, he would surely not be guilty of the intolerable vulgarity of thinking her the inferior of any suitor who could present himself. What I desire to do may be, as you say, an insensate folly. Very possibly it is, and that I shall tell you so one day, when you will have the only mortal happiness which never palls—the pleasure of being in the right. But at present leave me to my illusions. You may be quite sure they will not last long. You have never approved of my ways of life. You probably never will approve of them, whether I take the paths of virtue or the paths of vice.’

Lady Sunbury sat silent, pale, and stern. She would at all times with any other person pour out in pitiless *crescendo* the most bitter and violent reproaches, and bear off the triumph of the last word at any cost. But with Guilderoy she was conscious that there were limits which she could not pass and retain his affection; that a quarrel, if forced upon him, would have no reconciliation possible summoned in its train. The sense of that certainty restrained her bitterest words, for in her own manner she loved him almost more than she loved the sons that she had borne.

‘Of course it is all a jest,’ she said, with much self-control, as she rose and moved away; but her lips quivered with anger, and her eyes were dark with it.

‘Not in the least a jest,’ replied Guilderoy, but he said it carelessly, and did not pursue the theme, which was mentioned no more between them that evening.

In the morning Lady Sunbury received her letters in her own room; there was nothing of the very smallest importance in them. They consisted of circulars, petitions, political gossip, with a little note from one of her sons at Eton asking for fifty pounds; but they sufficed her as an excuse, and she sent word to her brother that she was extremely sorry, but news had reached her that morning which would oblige her to go home at once, taking London on her way.

‘I am extremely sorry too,’ Guilderoy wrote on a slip of paper. ‘But you know I always wish you to please yourself.’

And she went at noonday.

'I wonder you have not more curiosity,' he said with a smile, as he bade her farewell on the steps of the terrace.

She deigned to give no reply. But she had not gone many miles upon her homeward way before she became conscious of how utterly her usually ever-present wisdom of judgment had played her false at this moment. If pride had not forbade it, she would gladly have returned.

As the train swept round a bend on the rocks she saw in the distance the grey spires and towers of Ladysrood rising from their reddening forests and purple moorlands, with the soft sunlit mist of the September morning shrouding the hills at their back. Little given to such emotions as she was, Lady Sunbury saw them through another mist, which was of tears.

'There is one consolation, however,' she thought; 'even if there were anything serious in what he said, one week of wet November weather will drive this fancy from his thoughts and see him in Paris going southward. He will no more endure an English winter than the nightingales.'

And yet she regretted more and more that she had left Ladysrood with such precipitancy as the train flew on farther and farther over the breezy downs and wooded wolds of Somerset and Wilts.

## CHAPTER VIII.

THE days which succeeded the departure of his sister were the quietest which Guilderoy had ever passed in the whole course of his life. He had too effectually slighted and rejected the society of his county for anyone of his neighbours to venture to intrude on him. He was disinclined to invite any guest, male or female: the evenings found him sitting alone at dinner and reading alone in his library afterwards; twice or thrice a week he rode over to Christlea. He was astonished himself at the attraction the place had for him, at the force with which this caprice being opposed had now become the one present object of his life. He had given his word to John Vernon not to attempt to speak to the child save in his presence, and he kept his word; but the restriction annoyed him, and by its annoyance stimulated the fancy which had entered into him until it became something kindred to passion.

Gladys Vernon captivated his imagination; his ideal had always turned towards some mind wholly untainted by the world; some character fresh and candid and untouched by conventionality. He had created in imagination a thousand qualities

from women which he had never found in them; he had wanted at once passion and purity, high spirit and submission, romance and ignorance of all the emotions which make up romance; he had desired innumerable utterly opposed and contradictory instincts and characteristics. Only in this child he found, or at the least he fancied that he found, them united. Her courage, her indifference and her physical beauty were great, and the unstudied indifference and frank repose of her habitual manner attracted his taste and stimulated his vanity.

Her eyes were as unclouded, her cheeks as cool, her candour and her serenity as undisturbed, as when he first crossed the moorland with her; to move her from this repose became to him a matter of intense moment and interest: a pleasure which he could not deny himself.

Vernon was very proud. He felt as bitterly as though it were some merited indignity the certainty of all that those who had once known him would say of the marriage of his daughter to such a man as Guilderoy. The world always attributes bad motives, and to the world it would naturally appear that he had chosen his residence at Christslea with the ulterior view of gaining his landlord's title for his only and portionless child.

For a thousand intensely personal reasons his pain and irritation at Guilderoy's proposals were most sincere, and even for his child's own sake he would have infinitely preferred that her path in life should lie in those quieter and more obscure ways in which he honestly believed the most content and the least temptation to lie for any woman. But opposition and warning only increased the desires and determination of a character which was used to immediate attainment of all wishes with little consideration of who or what might pay for them.

All the water which Vernon strove to throw on the fires of this unreasonable caprice only served to increase them. From being slightly enamoured Gladys' suitor became ardently in love. He never once saw her out of her father's presence, and John Vernon would permit him to offer her no present or homage of any kind.

'I have told you,' he said to Guilderoy, 'more than once that you will not keep in the same mind over the turn of the year, and I will not consent to your sowing the seeds of ever so slight a regret in the heart of the child. Youth is short enough, you know, without its being cut prematurely in two by the knife of disillusion. She might care nothing at all for you, but on the other hand she might care much. She has no idea of what the emotions of life are, and she shall not make their acquaintance first through pain. You are one of those who love and ride away; you can ride away as soon as you please, but love here you shall not make.'

The doubt of his stability and sincerity so often expressed stung Guilderoy into becoming more stable and more sincere than he had ever been in his life. It was not the result John Vernon either contemplated or desired, although it was one for which the waywardness of human nature might have prepared him. But he had a little forgotten what human nature was like, living in his hermitage under the orchard boughs. He had lived so entirely with the great spirits of the dead that poor modern humanity, so fluctuating, so fitful, so effeminate and so little reasonable, scarcely commanded his sympathies or his understanding. Guilderoy seemed to him a man unequal to the great position and responsibilities to which he had been called by fate. He honestly disliked the notion of giving over to him the future and the happiness of his young daughter. 'He would not treat her ill; no, certainly not; nor with any roughness or cruelty,' he mused; 'but there was so many other ways of making a woman's heart ache, and the child herself has her faults. She is not easy to control or to understand, and then she is so terribly young. Ten years hence she will be only at the age when most women begin their life.'

Thus he received his landlord and neighbour with little cordiality, though he could not resist on his own part a certain sympathy with which Guilderoy inspired him personally. 'If I were a woman I should be in love with him,' he thought; 'but not being a woman I see him as he is, and he has all the defects of his generation. He mistakes the senses for the passions, culture for wisdom, pessimism for philosophy, and languor for superiority to ambition. It is the stuff of which patricians are always made in a decadence. It is interesting but it is powerless. Demos reigns over it, and it avenges itself with an epigram instead of drawing a sword.'

'You think ill of me,' said Guilderoy to him once at Christslea.

'No,' said John Vernon; 'that is far too strong an expression. You are what you cannot help being—you are the issue of a time which does not produce great men.'

'I have certainly no pretension to be great,' said Guilderoy, not flattered.

'That is what I complain of. You ought to have more than the pretension—you should have the inner sense, the intimate persuasion that you are bound to be so. Why does aristocracy everywhere recede before the mob? Because aristocracy has lost faith in itself. In England the Whig nobles began the surrender. They have been unable to stop half-way. They have been compelled to put the Phrygian Cap on their heads.'

'I see no difference between Whigs and Tories or between Tories and Radicals,' said Guilderoy. 'They both and all

spend their lives in buttering parsnips and offering them on their knees to the mob. I will not prepare such a platter, and therefore I have never entered public life.'

'Public life in England is a very poor thing, that I grant,' said Vernon; 'but it used to be a very grand thing, and if its nobility had been true to itself it might perhaps have been so still. Democracy is uninteresting, unintelligent, untrustworthy, illogical. The doctrine of the supremacy of mere numbers can never be either admirable or stable. The crowd is like the mud and sand of a foul sea shore—impotent to hold, powerful only to stifle. I quite agree with you, I wholly agree with you, that when a great Nobility took off its hat to the mud and the sand, and said, "We are your servants," it deserved to be kicked as it is being kicked by its master.'

'Why blame me for not doing it, then?'

'I am not aware that I ever did blame you. I quite admit that where public life has become such a parody of government that the Premier must scream like a Dulcamara, or every Minister make a tour of the provinces like a negro minstrel, it has come to such a pass that the scholar must scorn, and the gentleman must shun, and the proud men of every class refuse it. But I say that a time which makes its statesmen mountebanks, and would send a Pitt and a Burke, if it had them, to be only the mouthpieces of a caucus, is a time which can produce nothing great; and in which its nobles, if they are too proud to be delegates, become inevitably what you are.'

'And what is that?'

'A man perfectly accomplished and perfectly useless, to whom property is a burden and the world a dull comedy.'

Guilderoys's face flushed slightly.

'I do not dispute the justice of your verdict. My sister, Lady Sunbury, is always telling me the same things; so is my cousin Aubrey. But what would you have me do? Public life, you yourself admit, justifies my dislike of it. I have no genius with which to make myself remarkable. My property is left to those who have much more talent for managing it than I have. What do you call being useful? Breeding prize-cattle? opening town-halls? lecturing on poetry to the most unpoetical race on earth? sending youths to the university who will live to regret that they were ever taken from the plough? giving money to build palaces of pleasure and art for the most ludicrous and coarsest democracy that ever made pleasure loathsome and art grotesque, who would play Aunt Sally with the Venus of Milo, and grin in horseplay at the Laocoon? or yielding up good land out of fear to be cut up into chess-boards of vegetables to appease the labouring man, in the illogical belief that people hungering for all I have will be contented because out of

cowardice I offer them a cabbage? Which of these things do you think is useful? I beg leave to doubt that any of them would be. Everything which men of my order do of this kind is done out of fear. It is a motive by which I will not be inspired. They are like children trying to make a dyke against a flood with wooden spades. The flood is coming on us, and we shall not escape it, but we may at least await it with dignity. To consent to fell your ancestral oaks that Hodge may plant a cabbage the more in their place is not dignified, and it will do nothing against the deluge.'

'You should say that to the country,' reflected John Vernon, as Guilderoy continued with some warmth:

'The Greeks only let their helots loose once a year; we have given ours every day of the year, whether feast or fasting. Never before was there such abject abdication of birth, breeding, property, and learning before ignorance and greed, and the sheer brute force of numbers. I do not think that any human force can arrest the ugly rush down hill of democracy when once it has begun, but I think that we may abstain from degrading ourselves by swearing that we consider it a heavenward flight. Democracy is envy—envy of every kind of distinguished excellence. There is nothing noble, stimulating, or heavenwardly about it; men only pretend that there is, to obtain a little ephemeral and fictitious popularity. I do not suppose I am what is called a Tory, for I care nothing at all about the House of Hanover or the Church of England, but I do care about the supremacy of the fittest, and I do not recognise the fittest in the howling mob of a manufacturing city, or the crowds of hinds gathered at a hiring.'

'I am altogether with you,' said John Vernon, 'but I should like you to show them that you are of the fittest. Living in Italy, making love to innumerable women, and buying statues and pictures, do not prove it.'

'If I distressed myself ever so I should not affect the result,' said Guilderoy. 'All the public functions of English life are become grotesque. Parliamentary government compels every statesman to be nothing but a delegate. There is no real leadership possible. Even the great Cecil is compelled to bawl to mass-meetings. Public speaking has extinguished statesmanship. Can you imagine a Richelieu or a Warwick, a Sully or a Halifax, consenting to scream out the explanation of his projects and his motives to a mob? Would the solitary of Varzin rule Europe as he does if he had to solicit the applause of Bremen porters, and describe his designs to Lübeck cloth-sellers? What nation in the mass could ever be capable of comprehending the delicacy, the intuition, and the prophetic vision which alone make up great statecraft? What mob could ever be able to



measure the unseen forces of life, the science of history, the powers which govern men? None; and democracy, instead of being an era of peace, will be an eternity of little peddling wars, because nothing is so productive of war as ignorance, and then each little war will be hurried up and ended in a disgraceful and costly peace, because nothing is so soon frightened as a crowd, and no one is so willing to spend as a mob which pays no taxes.'

'Quite true,' said Vernon. 'But I wish you would say this in the Lords, and not only in this garden.'

## CHAPTER IX.

VERNON had been very unwilling to visit Ladysrood. He had refused continual invitations and entreaties from its owner. But at the last his own wishes were overborne by the wishfulness of his daughter to see the place which had so long filled so large a place in her childlike imagination. He could not resist the mute entreaty of her eyes, longing and expressive as a dog's, and at last, in the ruddy autumn weather, he consented to be driven over the moors and through its forest to the great lime-tree avenues which led to the front entrance of the house.

The light sparkled over the sculptured pinnacles, the high metal roofs, and the lofty towers of the composite but noble pile, and the whole residence wore an air of welcome and gaiety as they entered it.

Vernon sighed impatiently, as he stood in the great central quadrangle. Could not the master of this palace find some suitable mate in all the nobilities of Europe, that he must needs come and take a lonely man's one ewe lamb? His was not a selfish nature, but his heart hardened within him at what seemed to him the wanton waywardness of Guilderoy's caprice.

It was a brilliant day, though cold, and the reddened woods were glowing in a sun less pale than usual in an English autumn. The great house had the sunshine sparkling on all its many casements, and on its pinnacles, and crockets, and spires, and on the folds of the flag drooping above the central tower. The gardens were still gay with dahlias, and fuchsias, and tea-roses, and the fountains were all playing, while the peacocks drew their plumes over the terrace pavement. All that the place held, from its armoury to its hot-houses, from its State apartments where Tudor and Stuart sovereigns had slept, to its secret hiding chambers in the thickness of its walls, were all open to the sunlight and to Gladys Vernon.

She went through them enchanted and reverent, as though she turned the pages of some illuminated volume of Froissart or the Sire de Joinville. It was the first historic house which she had ever seen.

‘It is a very noble home,’ said John Vernon. ‘Really you ought never to be wearied of it.’

Guilderoy did not reply.

He was conscious that he did weary of it, and he regretted it.

‘It is so bad a climate,’ he said after a pause. ‘Rain is depressing despite oneself; if the house were in Touraine or in Tuscany it would be perfect.’

‘Our fathers did not mind climate. I do not know why we are so sensitive to it,’ said Vernon. ‘I am not sure whether it shows emasculation or increased sympathy with nature.’

‘Both, perhaps,’ answered Guilderoy. ‘And then, probably, their England was in no way so bad as ours. The centre of it was not one vast furnace as it is now. You have only to go to Venice to see how rapidly smoke changes atmosphere.’

‘Well, you have no furnaces within a hundred miles. Be thankful,’ said John Vernon.

Meanwhile his young daughter was gazing about her, with her violet eyes wide open in eager interest and brilliant with pleasure. The old house fascinated her. Though she had seen nothing but the sea and the orchards by Christslea, she had a passionate love of all beautiful and ancient things. Of art she knew nothing by sight, and had only heard of it through books and her father’s conversation, but she had the instinctive and unerring sense of its beauties and excellencies which is born in some temperaments.

Ladysrood was a treasure house of art; every generation which had passed away there had left something to increase the glories of its heirlooms; and the present lord himself had spent half a million of money in adding to its sculptures, and bronzes, and pictures. It was one of those palaces of the arts which have so long honoured England, hidden modestly away under her woods and in the folds of her low hills; and which are now in so many places being emptied and defiled, that the sound of the auctioneer’s hammer may ring in unison with the death-knell of great races and of national honour.

The child looked suited to the house; she wore a plain grey frock with a pale blue sash, and a wide-brimmed grey felt hat, and she might have sat to Romney or Sir Joshua. She had put in the bosom of her frock some roses which Guilderoy had given her; her face, alternately serious and pensive, and gay and animated, was as lovely as any face in the marbles or the canvases of his galleries. She was only a child, but he thought

that in the mere girl, fresh with the dews and the breezes of the country, it was easy to discern the great lady, the patrician beauty, of the future. She was now like a crayon sketch of Watts' or Leighton's, but a few years would make her a portrait in court dress by Carolus-Duran.

She was entirely a child ; the solitude of her life and its rural pleasures and pursuits had kept her infinitely younger in many things than children reared in the world can ever be, whilst on the other hand the conversation and companionship of her father had made her mind graver and more thoughtful than her years. John Vernon had liked that simplicity and rusticity and had always forborne from causing any change in them. He abhorred the new theories of education for women, and he had preferred to see his child care for roses, for birds, for the sea and the moors, for all outdoor things and outdoor movements, than to see her dissect a rabbit or hear her discuss protogenesis. He had always thought of her as a mere baby ; he had never been disturbed about her future or her right to see something of that world to which she by birth belonged. 'It will always be time when she is grown up,' he had always reflected ; and that time had always seemed to him so far off that there could be no immediate need to think of it.

The habit of being always treated by him as a child had kept her perfectly childlike, while on the other hand the deference with which she was treated by the few rustics and fisher-people who made up her little world had developed in her the habits of command and of decision. The opposing influences surrounding her had made her as little fitted for actual life as Tennyson's Princess or Coleridge's Christabel ; but it had made her courageous and candid in an unusual degree ; it had left her an infantine sweetness and innocence united to a great daring and seriousness ; it had rendered her indeed so entirely unlike all other girls or women that Guilderoy was not merely yielding to a romantic exaggeration when he thought he saw in her an embodiment of Shakespeare's heroines, with the freshness and the frankness, the simplicity and the strength of a more unsophisticated and heroic time than her own.

'How charming is a young creature who has seen nothing, and is ready to understand everything instinctively,' he said to her father when she had lingered behind them to look at a scene which had especially charmed her fancy.

Vernon smiled a little dubiously.

'You think so now because you happen to be in the mood to appreciate it, but in a little while you would find it monotonous, insipid, and uncultured. You would grow very tired of a mind which needed to have everything explained to it, and you would sigh for somebody who could catch your allusions flying.'

'You speak of your daughter as though she were a dairy-maid,' Guilderoy said with indignation.

John Vernon laughed.

'Oh no; I appreciate her, perhaps more thoroughly than you do. I even grant that she is a charming child in many ways, and the kind of ignorance she has pleases me; if it had not done so I would have taken steps to change it. But if you ask me whether I consider her a companion for a man of the world who lives in the world, I must say I do not. She would grow to his height in time no doubt, but he would have got fatigued of waiting for her long before she had reached there.'

'You are very obstinate.'

'Nay, I am not more obstinate than you, and I have more reason to be so, for I have more at stake.'

'You will persist in regarding all I feel as a caprice.'

'It is a caprice,' said Vernon with some impatience as his young daughter came up to them.

She had been enchanted with a little picture, a David Cox, which chanced to represent the creek below Christslea with its apple orchards and its red sandstone cliffs, and this sudden finding and recognising of a piece of her own home landscape had seemed to her a miracle which she could in no way forget. Her enthusiasm amused her father, and touched and charmed her host.

'It would make the old painter happy in his grave if he could hear you,' said Guilderoy. 'David Cox loved England as you do. Most of his green lanes, and gorse-covered commons, and moss-grown watermills are swept away by the curse of modernity, but that little creek of Christslea is not changed, I think, by so much as a wind-blown tree, the less or the more; even the boat he has drawn on the sand looks like an old red boat which is used to fish with there to-day. The man is dead, and the boat is there.'

'It is wonderful,' says Gladys in a tone of awe. 'It is not six inches long this little picture, and yet the whole creek is there, and one sees miles, miles, miles, out over the open sea, just as one does when one stands on the sands.'

'That is Art the Magician,' said Guilderoy. 'We are so used to the sorcery that we forget the wonder of it. We want fresh eyes like yours to see it for us.'

'You will surely let me give her that little water-colour?' he asked of Vernon when she was again a few yards away from them.

'No, by no means,' said the other almost rudely; the persistency of Guilderoy annoyed and irritated him; he was provoked that a man who had the whole world of women to choose from, must needs take a fancy to a country child who was as simple and untrained as a plant of sea lavender.

Luncheon was served in the small dining-room belonging to the Queen Anne suite of apartments, and when it was over John Vernon asked leave to return to the library, through which he had only passed hastily, and which was celebrated for its collection of State papers of the Tudor time, made by a learned earl in one of the previous centuries.

It was a noble room, though somewhat dark. It belonged to the oldest part of the house, and had deep embrasured windows, and walls and ceiling of carved oak. The catalogue of the books and manuscripts was a work of learning and care, as famous to bibliophiles as the collection itself. John Vernon was soon absorbed in its pages. It was a large folio lying open on a brass lectern. Guilderoy took advantage of his preoccupation to lead the girl to the other end of the room, where there was a beautiful illuminated Horæ of the fifteenth century under lock and key in a glass-case. While he turned the leaves over and explained to her the miniatures and allegorical borders he looked at her with a lover's eyes. She had taken off her hat, and the rebellious waves and curls of her hair shone in the pale light from one of the windows. Her eyes looked at him with the single-minded regard of a child of five years old. Her lips were parted as she listened, and the fairness of her throat looked like a lily beside the grey wool of her frock.

'After all,' he thought as he gazed down on her, 'there is nothing so bewitching as the morning of life; and old Herrick is right—

Gather your roses while ye may,  
Old Time is still a flying!

With scant regard for the priceless Horæ he had taken it from its double case and carried it into the embrasure of one of the windows, and he sat beside her, while the missal lay on her lap.

One of the miniatures was the marriage of St. Catherine with the child Jesus. Lilies and roses formed the border, and doves nested in twisted olive boughs above.

'That is very beautiful!' said Gladys; 'and the doves are just like my doves at home.'

'There is a dove which rests in the hearts of all of us some time or other,' he answered. 'Its name is love. Have you ever thought whether you would give it welcome?'

She looked at him in perplexity.

'No,' she said, slowly. 'At least, I am not sure. I love my father. Is that what you mean?'

'That is not at all what I mean,' said Guilderoy with a smile as he glided on to one knee before her, and held the missal on her lap. He was in no haste to dispel this unconsciousness, it pleased him. It was so wholly simple and sincere.

Any counterfeit of it would have been odious and contemptible, but the reality was lovely, grave and frank and sweet; as natural as the innocence of the dove.

'Tell me more stories,' she said, turning a page of the *Book of Hours*.

His attitude did not trouble her; she thought he knelt there to hold the heavy missal better.

Guilderoy did not reply; his eyes were dwelling on the youthful face above him, and he felt a passionate desire to cover it with kisses and to change the cool, faint colour of its lips and cheeks. He cast a rapid glance to where John Vernon at the other end of the room stood, with his back to them, bending over the lectern. The sun of the autumnal afternoon came through the leaded panes behind her, and shone about her head, giving it a shining nimbus and changing the grey of her fawn to silver. Her face was in shadow, and her dropped eyelids as she looked down on the book showed the deep dark line of the lashes, and gave her the grave and religious loveliness of some young saint.

'Would you love me a little?' he asked, leaning nearer, while his voice had the persuasive appeal in it which no woman to whom it had ever been addressed had ever resisted.

She was a little startled. Her eyes left the study of the *Horæ* and looked with bewilderment at him.

'I do not know,' she stammered, while, without her knowing why, her cheeks grew hot; 'I do not know. What do you mean? Why should I?'

'Because I love you,' he answered, with an infinite caress in the words, which are so old and yet are ever so new. 'Will you love me?' he asked her; 'and live with me here?'

She looked at him with serious and doubtful eyes.

'Live here—at *Ladysrood*? ' she asked.

'Well, yes; a few months out of the year—not more. I will be honest with you. But could you be happy with me, do you think?'

'I should like the house,' she said with hesitation, but with unflattering honesty.

'Would you not like me also?' said Guilderoy. His words were light, but his eyes were eloquent, and startled the child's calm soul. Quite suddenly, and for the first time in her life, a blush like the rose of dawn spread over her face and throat. She could not have told why, nor said what she felt.

'I do not know,' she stammered, and her eyelids fell.

'I will teach you to know,' murmured Guilderoy, and he drew her gently towards him, and kissed her.

## CHAPTER X.

FIVE minutes later John Vernon closed the catalogue, and turned and saw them.

‘Lord Guilderoy, I had your word,’ he said with great anger. ‘Could I suppose that you would betray me in such a manner as this? It is wholly unworthy of you—and in your own house also! For shame!’

Guilderoy’s face flushed a little.

‘You are very severe. Can you make no excuse for temptation? I quite admit that I have broken my word in the spirit, although not in the letter—since you were present. Is it worth while to make a quarrel of what cannot be unsaid now? Ask your daughter.’

The child stood looking from one to the other with some timidity. She did not wholly understand even now what it was which made her the subject of dissension. She was bewildered; afraid, and yet happy. The dark library seemed to her full of golden light.

‘Gladys, is it possible that you wish to leave me—and for a stranger!’ said her father, with pain and reproach in his voice and his heart.

She hung her head and her face burned with changing blushes.

‘It is not very far away,’ she murmured almost inaudibly.

John Vernon understood that she was lost to him, and that to strive against fate any longer was useless.

## CHAPTER XI.

‘I SWEAR that I will make your daughter happy, if human means can command happiness,’ said Guilderoy a little later when they were alone.

‘For six months perhaps,’ said Vernon with impatience.

‘Why do you doubt me so?’ said Guilderoy, offended and pained.

‘I do not doubt you in especial. You are possibly gentler and kinder than most men. But you are mortal, and you cannot prevent the divergence of character, the satiety of habit,

the destruction of illusions, the growth of new passions—all that is inevitable in human nature, and in utter defiance of which marriage, the supreme idiotcy of social laws, has been made eternal!

‘You are not encouraging.’

‘I desire so little to encourage,’ said John Vernon with some violence, ‘that if you will take back this evening the promise you have given my child this afternoon, far from blaming or reproaching you, I shall thank you. She does not care for you. You flatter and dazzle her, and she is in love with your house, but she would forget you in a week if you withdrew your word. Withdraw it; both she and you will be spared much sorrow.’

‘Your prophecies are painful to me,’ said Guilderoy; ‘but I will risk their realisation. I think she loves me already as far as a child of her years can understand love. She would be less innocent than she is if she loved me more. I have had enough of passion—too much of it. I desire repose.’

‘And in six months’ time you will say, “I am tired of repose; give me passion.”’

‘And do you think so lovely a creature incapable of inspiring it?’

‘I think she will be incapable of inspiring it in you because she will be your wife,’ replied John Vernon.

His heart was heavy and his forebodings were founded on his knowledge of mankind. He was well aware that his dislike to such a marriage for his child was ingratitude to fate and would have seemed to most men a kind of madness. He was well aware that the future of his young daughter had been often a subject of disquietude and anxiety to him, and that, in a worldly sense, no destiny more brilliant than this now offered could be desired for her.

But he despised worldly advantages. He had learned to know that happiness comes from within, not without. He considered that the contentment which she had learned with himself to feel amongst simple things and homely joys was worth more than the pomps and vanities of a great position. He did justice to the generosity and gentleness of Guilderoy’s temperament, but he did not believe in its stability or in its loyalty; nay, he believed in no man’s, because he knew that the affections, like the senses, are beyond our own control. He saw a thousand reasons why this union should become a source of ultimate regret and unhappiness to both of them. He saw few probabilities that it would end otherwise than in estrangement and disappointment to both of them.

‘The child is wholly unfit for your position,’ he said angrily. ‘She knows the names and qualities of all the apples in England,



and she knows something of the history of England from first sources ; but she knows next to nothing more, and no one wants to hear of pippins and russets or of Hengist and Horsa in your world. Go away, my dear lord, and you will have forgotten that she exists in ten days' time.'

'She has not an idea of what you mean,' he added bitterly.

Marriage is only a word to her. She thinks of living in Ladysrood as a child of five years old would think of it—as a delightful and roomy play-place. All that ignorance will excite you and interest you entirely for a few weeks—I know that—but at the end of those weeks you will ask yourself angrily why you took a country child to make you ridiculous. When you have dissipated the ignorance, what remains behind will not interest you in the least. You will begin to expect a woman's wisdom and patience in her, and you will not find them—children are never patient or wise. You think me a prophet of ill. I am one, certainly. It is utterly impossible that a girl like her and a man like you can live together without bitter disappointment and endless friction.'

'She is too young! She is too young!' he repeated to himself again and again that night on his return from Ladysrood. He had said nothing to the child alone—what was the use of questioning her? She did not know her own heart: how could she answer for it?

'You are not glad?' she asked him wistfully when she came to bid him good-night. He looked away from her and drew her head down on his breast and kissed her curls.

'I hope you may be as happy, my darling, with him as you have been with me. I do not think you can be more so,' he said tenderly, and said nothing more. What use was it to alarm her young soul with suggestions of perils and sorrows which she would be wholly unable to understand? Life looked to her like the gilded and illuminated pages of the Ladysrood missal. Why tell her that these pages would be stained and blotted by tears?

In the little parlour of Christslea Guilderoy and John Vernon sat long in conversation that evening.

Neither convinced the other.

The incipient friendship which had begun to grow up between them had been disturbed and diminished by the precipitancy of the one and the opposition of the other. Vernon considered himself dealt with in bad faith, and Guilderoy grew impatient at the discontent with which his proposals were received.

'Does he think it would be a happier fate to have all her youth pass away in this little combe by the sea with no companions but the gulls and the rabbits?' he thought, with a not

unnatural sense that the immense gifts brought in his own hands were too little appreciated, whilst yet he respected all the more a man who accounted material and social advantages as of so little avail.

It was in vain that he offered the most princely presents to her and promised to render her, as far as fortune went, wholly independent of himself.

John Vernon heard all this with little patience.

‘I do not doubt your generosity or your justice,’ he said more than once. ‘I have told you before, I am convinced that you are not a man to injure or to defraud a woman. But against what I fear you can give no possible guarantees. You wish for Gladys at this moment as you have wished for a hundred women before her and will wish for a hundred women after her. You will tell me that you feel differently to her to what you have done to others, and no doubt you believe it; but you are mistaken. You feel precisely the same, and your caprice will pass as all your other caprices have done.’

‘Will you not allow me even to know my own emotions?’ said Guilderoy with anger. ‘And will you tell me what greater proof any man can give of the honesty of his emotions than to desire to make anyone his wife whom he loves?’

‘That is quite true,’ replied her father, ‘and I do not question your present sincerity—I cannot do so in face of the evidences you are willing to give of it. But I do not think that your emotions are of the kind you fancy them, and I am wholly certain that my poor child will not have the knowledge, the character, or the education in her which could alone enable a woman to keep her hold on the affections of such a man as you. Remember what the Master of Love said—

Ut levis, absumentis paulatim viribus, ignis  
Ipse latet, summo candet in igne cinis;  
Sed tamen extinctas, admoto sulphure, flammās  
Invenit, et lumen, quod fuit ante, reddit.

My child will not know how to throw the sulphur on the fading flames, and your fire will die out on her altar.’

‘I am tired of the sirens who throw the sulphur,’ replied Guilderoy. ‘“Et puer est, et nudus Amor.” I want the innocence of extreme youth and the divine nudity of a soul which has nothing to conceal. Give them to me and I will respect them.’

John Vernon sighed impatiently and abandoned the argument.

He did not doubt the entire good faith of his companion, but he was none the less certain of the truth of his own predictions. Guilderoy wished for these things as a child wishes for playthings, but they would have no more power to secure his

constancy than the toy to charm the child for ever. But with love, as with anger, he knew that it was waste of breath to argue.

Guilderoy had received another letter that day from Italy which had also irritated him excessively ; a letter full of those useless reproaches, those unwise rebukes, those injudicious and violent demands which are the whips wherewith women think to scourge to activity a dead or dying passion. They are usually as futile as a whip of nettles used on a marble statue. They were not absolutely ineffective here, for they succeeded in stinging his soul into anger and rebellion ; but they utterly failed to accomplish the purpose for which they were intended. On the contrary, they confirmed him in the wish which, half in jest half in earnest, had moved him to give his life into the hand of Gladys Vernon.

He was a man of sudden impulses, romantic fancies, and very hasty action which was united with an indolent and vaguely philosophic temper. The letter was imperious, reproachful, and passionate. It produced on him the opposite effect that it was intended to produce on him. It made him angry, irritated, and desirous to assert an independence which every word in it refused to him. Guilderoy, like many men who are tender of heart and yet unconsciously selfish, was easily led but was difficult to drive. If he felt coerced he rebelled instantly. Tact and persuasion might lead him long, but the instant he felt that there was any effort to coerce him by force he grew restive, and men much less amiable and gentle were much easier to direct and to command than he. His correspondent made the supreme error of exacting as a right what had no charm unless it were voluntary, and claiming as a due what was nothing if it were not a gift. The wood-dove was right in his choice, he thought, but only right as long as his companion pleases him and leaves him free. If she fasten a fetter on his foot the very fussing and fretting of the sparrows were better than the columbarium in the clouds.

He shrank from the intent to rule and hold him which was so visible in the letter he had just received ; he felt a vehement desire to vindicate his liberty against the claims which she so obviously showed her intention to lay upon it for ever, or at least for such a 'for ever' as her pride and her passion might desire and demand from the future. He was a Lancelot whom Guinevere might have bound for ever to her girdle if she had never let him feel that there was a chain under the silken leash. But as every Guinevere had been so rash and so blind as to let him feel it and be galled by it, each had in turn had his allegiance but a brief while. The Duchess Soria had had it longer than any other.

She had many advantages. She lived farther away from him than most ; she had greater beauty than most ; and she had that eminence of social position which raises a woman so high that no lover can doubt her sincerity in her selection of him, or her facilities for replacing him by others if she chose. These advantages had made her reign over his passions and command his allegiance longer than any other woman had done. It had been always understood that if Hugo Soria died, Guilderoy would ratify his devotion by marriage ; but he himself had never cared to contemplate that probability ; for the rest, Soria was almost as young as he was himself, and there was no apparent likelihood of his freeing his wife of his presence on earth, unless some unforeseen accident or some duel ending fatally were to prematurely cut short the measure of his days. Had he died, the world and Beatrice Soria herself would have expected her lover to replace him ; the certainty with which she would have expected this allowed a too dominant and insistent tone of appropriation to show now through the lines of her letter, and raised in the feelings of its reader that instinct of rebellion which lies in the breast of all men. His intimacy with her had lasted years enough for many faults in her character to have become revealed to him. He had had time to outlive the belief in those perfections which every man who is much in love attributes to his mistress ; he knew her to be imperious, exacting, and disdainful when offended. They were defects which in daily life poison peace more cruelly than any others.

Beatrice Soria in Paris or Naples, visited at intervals, and seen only in her superb bloom of beauty, had a great and irresistible sorcery for him, but Beatrice Soria as the eternal companion of his fate would have alienated and have irritated him unbearably.

Or, at the least, he thought so now, as his conscience smarted and his impatience rebelled under the lash of her impassioned reproaches and recall.

He read her last letter many times when he sat in the solitude of the library on the evening of that day. It did not touch his heart ; it disturbed his temper. It made him feel blamable and selfish, but it did not make him feel regretful or repentant. He laid the paper down before him under the light, and then looked up from it to the window far off where Gladys had sat a week or two before and he had held the great missal upon her knee.

The embrasure of the window was shrouded in the dark velvet curtains which the servants had drawn at nightfall, but he seemed to see her tall, slender, stooping form seated there, her golden-haired head, her face with its first sudden blush. He was not in love with her : no, it did not seem to him that even

yet his new feeling merited that name, but he was haunted by the thought of her, distressed by the desire of her. She was unlike anything of her sex that he had ever known, and she seemed already a part of Ladysrood like its marble figures of Florence and its old sweet roses of France.

He hesitated no more, but drew pen and paper to him and began to answer the letter which lay under his hand. It was not an easy task. To say to a woman who loves him that he not only loves her no longer, but has transferred his allegiance elsewhere, is painful to any man who has a conscience and a memory.

He had those vague sentiments of inclination to the refreshment of repose, of pure affections, and of family ties which visit at times all men who have imagination and emotions, and which are perhaps the most utterly delusive and misleading of all their fancies.

Again and again has the mirage of innocent and lawful joys passed alluringly before the eyes of a tired man of the world, and has been followed by him only to bring him to the desert sands of monotony, of weariness, and of thralldom.

He was perfectly sincere when he assured John Vernon of his indifference to the passions and the pleasures of which his life had hitherto been so full, and of his wishes for a simpler, purer, and more legitimate attachment than those which he had known. But though he had not any intention of deceiving others, he did so because he deceived himself and took what was a mere passing phase of imagination for a lasting alteration in his temperament.

Was it true that of this child he really knew no more than of a shut book, of which the exterior pleased him? Was it possible that with the passing of the years he would grow farther and farther from her rather than she nearer and nearer to him? His reason and his observation of the lives of others told him that it was very possible.

Fancy and admiration had hurried him into an action in which opposition had confirmed his persistency. But now that in cold blood he looked at his future, he could not feel sure that he would never repent an act which gave power over it into the hands of a child whose affections even were scarcely his, and of the tenacity of whose character he had had evidence.

He desired to possess her beauty, and he was fascinated by the courage and the simplicity which he saw in her; but the prophecies of John Vernon haunted and disquieted him, and his knowledge of his own temperament told him that they were not unlikely to be true hereafter.

How much of mere caprice, of sheer waywardness, of momentary impatience of existing ties, and of amusement at irrtating

the opposition of his sister had there not been mingled with the more poetic and personal feelings which had first sent him to Christ'slea?

'After all, it is the folly of life which lends charm to it,' he thought, but he felt that if John Vernon had been able to know his thoughts he would have told him that the love which does not blindly believe itself to be the highest wisdom of life has the seeds of death in it at its birth.

Indeed, he was well aware of it himself.

The warning words produced a vague effect upon him.

He felt vaguely that the future might justify them, and although he had been so self-willed in following out his caprice, he almost regretted now that fate had granted him his wishes.

Had he mistaken a momentary desire for a strength of feeling such as was needed to outlast the stress of time?

In vain he told himself that Beatrice Soria had no claim of any sort upon him; he knew that the mere absence of claim constituted her strongest title to his fidelity; he knew moreover that his relations with her had touched her heart and her passions profoundly whatever they had done to his own.

He was tired of those relations; they had a side to them which wearied and irritated him; he had resolved in his own mind to go back to her no more, because recrimination and reproach had of late formed the staple of her welcome. Yet the announcement of his marriage was very difficult to him to make, and now and again he pushed the paper from him and leaned his head upon his hands and saw the eyes of his forsaken love burning on him through the dark. She had not been alone in his affections, but she had been chief in them; and he knew that he had reigned supreme in hers. The letter of farewell which he was compelled to compose seemed a cowardice. It was the kind of letter which a gentleman cannot write without feeling that he loses something in his own self-esteem by writing it; indeed, the more truly he is a gentleman the more acutely he will feel this.

But despite his reluctance and the difficulty of the task, it was written at last, and when it had gone away from him irrevocably in the post-bag with which a lad rode fifteen miles over the moors every morning, he had a sense of relief; of such relief as comes from a decision taken without power to undo or to modify it.

What would she answer?

He counted the days which must elapse before a reply could reach him, and opened the letter-bag with anxiety when those days had passed. To his astonishment he received no answer at all; days became weeks, weeks months, and silence alone followed on his declaration of self-chosen and deliberate inconstancy.

Such silence made him uneasy and apprehensive. He knew that it was not the silence of indifference; and, if not that, then what must it portend?

Once or twice he was tempted to break it by writing again himself. But this he felt it was impossible to do; no man can insist on, or emphasise by unasked repetition, his own avowal of mutability and voluntary faithlessness. Silence was, at least, acquiescence and permission.

He had sought these and he could not quarrel with receiving them. Meanwhile he felt free to do what he was bent on doing, and used all his powers of persuasion to induce Vernon to shorten his probation.

Vernon was very reluctant to do so.

'She does not love you. She does not know what love is. You mistake if you fancy she does,' he said to Guilderoy, who smiled.

'I will teach her,' he answered.

'Yes,' said John Vernon with pain and impatience, 'and when she has learned the lesson it will have grown dull to you, and the teacher will go elsewhere. What is the cause of half the misery of women? That their love is so much more tenacious than the man's; it grows stronger as his grows weaker. He desires one thing which is quickly satisfied; she desires innumerable things which can never be satisfied, and among them as the most mythical and the most impossible she desires—poor soul!—the man's constancy.'

Where other men would only have seen the gain and honour of such a marriage he saw the grey cloud of possible, of most probable, unhappiness. As he walked in calm dark evenings by the little bay beneath his house the murmur of the waves sounded mournfully on his ear; and as he looked up at the attic window of his daughter's room shrouded in the ivy of the eaves, it was no mere selfish sense of his own coming loneliness which made him wish to heaven that Guilderoy had never come across her path.

Happiness is not a thing to be commanded, he thought with sadness and anxiety, to be obtained by any ingenuity, or retained by any obedience to precept or to duty. It is the most spontaneous thing on earth; born only of the sympathies of two natures which mutually supply each other's needs; it is like the sunshine and the shower, and can no more be brought into human life by any endeavour than they can be brought on earth by the efforts of science. Happiness is the dew of the heart, making all green things spring where once the soil was barren; but it is not in human nature to create it at will, and it is a gift of destiny like genius or beauty.

True, ingrates mar the gift, as in the fairy story the talisman

is lost by careless keeping; but it comes to none at prayer, at exercise of will: it is a treasure of the gods, and alas! 'Deos ridere credo, quum felix vocat.'

But Vernon's wishes and his regrets could not stay the flight of time, nor change a caprice which opposition or warning only served to inflame; and before he was wholly sensible that the winter was gone, violets and hepatica were abloom in his orchard grass, and the little fishing fleet was setting out for its springtide harvest of the sea, and March was ended, and Guilderoy claimed from him a promise which he had no choice but to fulfil.

They were married in the private chapel of Ladysrood with no one present by her father's wish except himself and the old servants of the house, and she wore the white cambric frock which she had for her best for summer Sundays at Christslea, and about the throat of it were strings of pearls which Guilderoy had given her and which were worthy a queen's regalia.

The heart of John Vernon was heavy as he left them to themselves, and took his way back to his solitary house through the budding woods, over the wide moors lying in the pale afternoon sunlight, while the sound of the more distant sea came like human sighs through the rural silence to his ears. There was the scent of violets on the wind and the golden gleam of gorse in the landscape; ever and anon he came in sight of the sea, grey and still, red sails and white crossing it noiselessly. The day was clear and soft and mild, the scene was fair, and yet the sense of a great sadness weighed upon him as he left his child the mistress of all these spreading woods and stately towers and pleasant gardens which lay behind him under the pale grey skies.

The world, he knew, would tell him with all its myriad voices that he had, in his solitude and poverty, had a stroke of the most marvellous good fortune, a social triumph such as most would prize and covet beyond all things. But John Vernon did not see as the world sees, and he would with much surer confidence and greater joy have known that his daughter had gone to a lowlier fate, where the world would have never given her that crown of envy which is so often a crown of thorns. Never again would the little simple things of life make her happiness; never again would she run through the wet grass a mere careless child, happy because a lamb was born, or a sea mouse was washed up by the tide, or the first daffodils were blowing under the trees of the orchard.

The world despised such simple things, but then, was the world right? Would that collar of pearls which was fit for a queen give her in truth half the pleasure that her daisy chains had given her in the meadows under the apple bough?

'Nay, I grow old and shall feel lonely, and so see all things



in shadow. Life can stand still with none of us, with her no more than with others,' he told himself as he walked over the moors, and he looked at the yellow gorse shining before him in the light of the afternoon, and tried to hope that 'straight was a path of gold' for her.

## CHAPTER XII.

'My dear Hilda,' wrote Guilderoy to his sister, 'I am about to marry the daughter of Mr. Vernon of Llanarth, as I told you in September that I should do. You have been always exceedingly desirous that I should marry, only it was on condition that you should be empowered to choose the companion of my destinies. As I am the more interested of the two in such a choice, I have ventured to make the selection without applying to you. I should be sorry if you should persist in quarrelling with me about it, because there is really no valid ground whatever for a quarrel. Gladys Vernon is not a kitchen-maid, a *femme tarée*, or an American adventuress in search of a title, the only three persons to whom you would, I think, be justified in objecting *vi et armis*. She is quite a child, and I venture to hope that you will be kind to her. When will you return to Ladysrood and let her see you?'

The letter concluded with some allusions to other matters of less personal interest, and was signed with affectionate expressions.

It reached Lady Sunbury when she was staying with a large party with her uncle at Balfrons. The shock of the intelligence was increased by her knowledge of her own error in leaving her brother's house; who could tell what influence she might not have had if she had remained with him? The fact that she had not the very slightest kind of influence on Guilderoy at any time did not occur to her remembrance. She was a clever woman, but like many clever people she had no just estimate of her power over others; because she felt the ability to guide them she imagined that she had the means to do so, an error common enough in human nature.

'Evelyn is going to marry a country girl because she beat some village boys off a fox!' she cried with intense bitterness to her cousin Aubrey, who chanced to be in the library at Balfrons at that moment. 'Good heavens! a man who has declined half the best alliances in Europe goes and throws himself away in some moment of mad caprice on a rustic. Some-

body with brown hands, and lean elbows, who will make me look ridiculous when I have to present her ! Somebody whom he will get divorced from with some horrible *esclandre* and uproar that will be the talk of London a whole season !'

'A country girl ?' said Lord Aubrey, raising his eyebrows ; *'Je lui donne une quinzaine !'*

'Is it not just like him ?' cried Lady Sunbury, with a quiver of unutterable scorn in her voice. 'Is it not exactly the kind of thing we might be sure he would do ? After all these years of hypercriticism, of superciliousness, of disdain, all these years of romantic caprices and impossible passions, after rejecting all the most charming women in Europe, to go and throw his life away on a rustic hoyden, a vixen whom he saw fighting with a mob of village boys !'

Aubrey laughed ; he was accustomed to his cousin's manner of arranging circumstances according to her own views of them.

'I don't think it can be quite as bad as that,' he said, turning over the letter, which she had thrown to him. 'One can trust Evelyn's taste in women and pictures. But if you knew there was any danger of this affair, why did you not stay on at Ladysrood ?'

'Would to heaven I had !' said Lady Sunbury, with infinite bitterness. 'I should have seen her at any rate !'

'I wouldn't make a quarrel if I were you,' said Aubrey. 'You see he writes very well ; he is evidently anxious you should countenance the affair, and that is a good deal for him to admit.'

'Countenance it ! Never !'

'Then you will make a great blunder,' said her cousin very sensibly. 'There is nothing for anyone seriously to object to, we may be sure ; he is not a man to marry anybody beneath him, and it is merely a matter of good feeling with him to ask your approbation ; what you do cannot really matter two straws to him. Come, write something pleasant. Why quarrel ? After all, it does not really concern you.'

'Concern me ?' repeated Lady Sunbury, in a voice stifled by rage. 'Not concern me ? What should concern me ? What should concern me if not the honour of my family, the reputation of my brother, the purity of my father's name, the respect of my own native county ?'

'Those valuable things are all safe enough,' said Aubrey, carelessly. 'Evelyn is a fool in some ways, but he will not buy a *pêche à quinze sous* with his family pride : in that kind of matter he is the proudest man living. Of course it does not please you ; it is natural it should not please you ; but if I were you I would try to look as if it did. Pleasantness is always the best policy before anything which we cannot alter.'

'What is the matter?' asked the Earl of Sunbury, coming in with a bundle of letters for his wife to answer.

'Guilderoy is going to marry a country girl, and Hilda takes it as an insult to herself,' replied her cousin.

Sunbury gave a long whistle.

'A country girl, and you will have to present her?' he said, with zest in anything which annoyed his wife.

'Others may present her. I shall not,' said Lady Sunbury.

'Ah! you mean to make a row of it? You always make a row. Lots of people will present her. Perhaps she has decent people of her own. Is she born, as the French say?'

'You had better write and congratulate him,' said his wife.

'He cares so much for your opinion!'

'I shall certainly congratulate him. I always like him, though he monopolises all the amiability of his family,' replied Sunbury, who had often found the generosity of his brother-in-law convenient and long-suffering.

'Oh, yes; write and felicitate him, both of you,' said Aubrey, rising and going away before what he foresaw would be a cumubial quarrel. 'He has done a great folly, and of course he will regret it immeasurably, and all that, but we cannot alter it; and after all it is his own affair. And you would not like Madame Soria better, and it would be Madame Soria some day if it were not some one else.'

'A wholesome English girl is certainly better than *that*, if she be a dairymaid,' said Lady Sunbury; and towards evening she wrote a letter which was almost kind in tone, although the kindness was marred and jarred by many prophecies of ill.

'It is strange how certain both she and John Vernon are that we shall be miserable!' thought Guilderoy when he received it.

### CHAPTER XIII.

GUILDEROY had a palace of his own in Venice, placed on one of the curves of the Grand Canal, one of the oriental palaces with Byzantine windows, and carved and painted walls, and a water-story of white marble, with great pointed doors and wide flights of water steps, and at its side one of the lovely luxuriant green gardens of Venice with acacia and cereus drooping over its low red wall. It was to this palace of his every April that his thoughts turned longingly, and it was thither that he took Gladys in the early spring days of the year. It seemed to him the most fitting place that love and youth could find. It was a spring-time even more than usually radiant, fragrant, and mild,

and the Venetian air was full of the scent of the primroses blooming on the Brenta banks, and of the budding narcissus in the meadow grass of the many islands.

It was a change such as the wand of any Prospero might have caused, which suddenly carried her from the sea mists and bare orchards and channel winds of the Christlea shore, to the shining waters, the liquid sunshine, the gorgeous marbles, and the cloudless moonlight evenings of the Adriatic city.

The charm of Venice is one of those emotions which must be felt not told, which are too delicate, too intricate and too romantic to be ever coldly dissected and described.

Venice escapes alike the poet and the painter. They may pourtray her past and paint her waterways, but they cannot embody her fugitive and unutterable fascination any more than they can give on canvas that faint red glow, those silvery dove-hued waters, that dreamy and exquisite silence, those ethereal visions of evening on sea and land.

The balmy air, the radiant light, the slow soft motion of the pliant gondola, the amorous music floating down the moonlit water, the shadowy splendour of the stately frescoed chambers, were all in the sharpest and strongest contrast with the rude coast, the grey boisterous water, the simple ways, and the narrow rooms, the misty mornings and the chilly eves, the sober colours and the sombre moorlands of her English home. It was a sensation which charmed yet hurt her; she felt much as one of her own pigeons from Christlea, brought from the shady roost under the thatch to dwell amongst the pigeons of St. Mark, would have felt amongst the marble lodges, the gilded pinacles, the bewildering sunshine, and the glittering mosaics.

She wished with all her soul that he had let her spend these springtide weeks in the budding gardens and the secluded rooms of Ladysrood. There she would have felt less frightened, more familiar; here the intense light seemed like a million curious creatures all staring at her, and when the bold eyes of the gondoliers looked at her with a smile in them she felt herself colour scarlet as at some violating touch.

Guilderoy, who had felt from his earliest years the magic of the Adriatic, grew impatient with his companion that she seemed so little sensible of it and sighed for the elm-tree boles and primrose roots of wet dim English fields.

It was not insensibility, but for once his discernment was not profound enough to let him see this. The girl was bewildered and inarticulate, rather from excess of emotion than of lack of it, and longed for the familiar landscapes of her short past from the same instinct as makes a stray animal seek its homing pastures.

The scenes around her were too beautiful and intoxicating

for her to know how to bear them, even as were the ardours of those new passions which had whirled her from childhood into womanhood at a bound.

Guideroy was as far from divining what she felt as were the men whose oars took them through the shining waters. She remained shyer than he wished ; he was half impatient of it as insensibility, but all the mute vague passions, the unspoken emotions, the timidity at her own sensations, and the shrinking from all observation which were in her, he knew and heeded very little.

She never looked back in after times to those weeks in Venice without a sense of them as of some dream too beautiful and marvellous ever to be repeated, and yet with a vague awe and terror touching its beauty with a darkness that enhanced its light. She never in after days saw the gold sunbeams ripple on the silvery surface of the lagoons, or the marbles of St. Mark shine white beneath the moon, without the remembrance of the half-unconscious rapture and the bewildered embarrassment and apprehension which she had felt in that April time of love.

‘You have never yet told me that you love me !’ he said to her once with some amusement and some annoyance blended in his thought.

She looked up a moment, then her eyelids fell.

‘I can feel but I cannot speak,’ she might have answered had she not been too shy, but shyness held her silent.

‘I wonder what she does feel,’ he thought, rather with curiosity than with emotion. ‘It is almost like making love to a statue or a corpse, she is so irresponsible. She is not cold, but she is so still one cannot tell whether it is her senses which are still asleep or her affections. She is rather alarmed by than moved to any pleasure, and yet now and then, when I glance at her unawares, there is a look in her eyes that is like love. I suppose the truth is that John Vernon was right—she is too young.’

But however young she might be she was very lovely, and her absolute passionlessness and stillness at the present time had a seduction for him which was in a manner morbid, and yet sweet, tantalising and yet alluring, enhancing his passions, though failing to arouse in him higher and stronger emotions. He did not understand the intense shyness which enveloped her as a frost encloses and sheets over a lake ; the depths of the water, with all their stirring and palpitating life are there beneath, but so covered that none can see them. He did not understand the mingled terror and ecstasy which his own love was to her, and the bewilderment her own feelings and agitation were to her. A man less impassioned and more patient

might have alarmed her less, and so succeeded in calling out the timid intensity of her soul into actual expression; but he had not the self-denial or the patience requisite, and he had enveloped her in the fires of passion before he had ever sought to penetrate the arcana of her waking soul. She loved him with all the force of her nature, but she could not have said so to save her life; and with this love which had so suddenly surged up in her and overwhelmed her there was a sense of fear mingled; the only fear which had ever touched her dauntless and courageous temper. The fear was sweet to her, but still it was fear; not fear so much of him as of herself, and of all the strange emotions which had risen in her.

If she could have spoken what she felt, she would have poured out poems as sweet and as ardent as any that ever poet penned. But timidity and ignorance of what name to give her own emotions held her mute, and he remained in doubt as to whether she were physically cold or mentally unintelligent. Before he had been in Venice a month he remembered with regret the warning which her father had given him: 'You will soon wish for those who can throw the sulphur on the fading flames.'

His affection for her had increased since they had been together, for he had recognised since then more fully the delicacy, the honour, and the high breeding of her character, but his caprice was already losing something of its attraction, and his passions were demanding more response to them.

'I strive to make her happy,' he wrote to John Vernon, 'but I am not as sure as I wish to be that I succeed.'

John Vernon wrote back to him, 'You do not succeed because you have called on a child's soul for a woman's passions; you have pulled open the rose-bud to make a full-blown rose. It is impossible that your rose should be perfect.'

He felt some impatience of her entire passiveness. He wished either for refusal and opposition or for responsive passion; but she yielded to him like a slave, and yet responded no more in feeling than if she were a form of ivory or wax. It was seductive from its strangeness; and yet it was, he foresaw, what in a few months would fatigue him, and be insufficient for him.

'It is a pity that we need go home so soon,' he said once with regret.

She turned to him with a smile, 'Oh, no! Ladysrood is even dearer than this.'

'We cannot go to Ladysrood,' said Guilderoy, with a little impatience, 'you must be seen in London. I hate London. It is the antithesis of everything I like; but, if you were not presented, they would say I had married a gypsy or a gardener's daughter.'

'Would that matter very much?' said Gladys, with her delicate eyebrows drawn a little together.

'No, I do not know that it would; but Englishmen are always conventional, even when they don't know it; all men are, indeed, who belong to a certain world. I do not care what people say—no man cares less; and yet I feel that I should be irritated if they talked nonsense about me.'

Gladys was silent. Her feelings were all primitive and direct. She was far from understanding complexity of sentiment or the existence of two morbid yet contradictory feelings at the same moment.

'I love Ladysrood,' she said, with a great longing in her voice, 'and I love the country. All the time we have been here I have been thinking of that line of Browning's,

Oh, to be in England, now that April's there.

Guilderoy looked at her in surprise.

'I did not know you had read Browning. He is not a child's poet. And, my dear, do not set your heart on living at Ladysrood. I told you honestly, you will remember, that I could not promise to be often there.'

'Yes, I remember.' A shadow passed over her face—not of resentment but of disappointment, which troubled him more.

'You will enjoy the world when you know it,' he said consolingly. 'All women do. There are things besides daisies and buttercups that will please you. The country is infinitely soothing when one is ill or unhappy, or has failed to attain anything one wanted; but it is tedious, and its outlook is narrow. Imperceptibly one adopts the small views which make up its world, and the forces of one's mind get narrowed to suit them. And the country in England is so much more intolerable than anywhere else, because the weather is so bad: to endure it long one must have the rusticity of Wordsworth's mind and boots and stockings as homely.'

Gladys did not reply. She looked down into the water through which she was drawing her left hand, taking pleasure in the brushing of the ribbon weed against her fingers.

'Do you really dream of living at Ladysrood all the year round?' he asked her, impatiently.

'I should like it,' she said, gently. 'But then, of course, I do not know any other life than that country life.'

'Ask me anything else,' said Guilderoy, 'but not that, for heaven's sake.'

'I will never ask you anything. My father told me not.'

'But I wish you to ask me for anything that comes into your fancy,' he said, vaguely irritated. 'My dear child, if you and I cannot say frankly to each other any whim or folly that

comes into our heads, who on earth should do so? There is no happiness possible, Gladys, where there is any reserve.'

The girl was silent, her fingers playing with the water weeds on the limpid shallows of the lagoon.

'Do you understand?' he continued, still impatiently, though tenderly; 'I wish you to confide in me all your desires, and, as far as it is mortally possible, I will do my utmost to gratify them.'

'You are very good to me,' said Gladys, with a little hesitation.

'That is not the language of love,' said Guilderoy with annoyance.

The girl coloured; her lips parted to speak, but words failed her. She longed to tell him that she loved him with all her soul so far as youth can love, but she was shy to utter anything she felt. She seemed to him less intelligent and far less tender than she really was.

Guilderoy had himself the infinite expectations and anticipations which belong to those whose feelings are rather impassioned than profound, and whose imagination is more vivid than their constancy is durable. But he had not the patience which is often necessary for the full comprehension of character, especially of character which is half developed and still growing.

Every day the memory of John Vernon's philosophic warnings recurred more often to him, and he was more persuaded of their truth. And yet he was still greatly enamoured of her. Her physical beauty was too great to let him be otherwise, and the sense of the absolute freshness and innocence of all her nature were in a sense very lovely to him after the many women, so unlike her, whom he had known.

And yet there was something wanting. She understood so little, she responded so little, she was still so much more frightened than she was happy at the dominance of love. He felt that it had been unwise to take her away from the simple, childish, unemotional life which had been so far more suited to her years. Her father had been thoroughly right. Guilderoy, before a week was out, acknowledged it to his own soul. A man more patient and less voluptuous by temperament and habit than he was might have seen by intuition into all the treasures of her unuttered feelings, but he only thought her impatiently a child whose slumbering senses and alarmed bashfulness irritated and fatigued him. The startled nymph should, to please his taste, have grown suddenly at his touch into a goddess, and she did not do so.



## CHAPTER XIV.

THERE are few prettier scenes than the great Piazza of San Marco on a summer's night. The gaiety of the sauntering crowds, the sparkling of the many lights, the animation of the cafés and the colonnades, the sound of the military music, and the ring of the spoons on the platters of ice or the saucers of chocolate, are all of them like Paris in June ; but then there is something else too, something that is not to be found in Paris or anywhere else than in Venice ; there are the mighty walls and columns of marble towering up into the blue darkness of the sky ; there is the shaft of the bell-tower, seeming to stretch and touch the stars ; and there is the sense and the sound of the sea waves close at hand ; while above—high above in the shadows—the twin lights which have burned there every night for five hundred years for the soul of a murdered man shine as steadily as the twin stars of the Pointers.

So much has been rhymed and written of Venice that nothing hardly is left to say, and yet with it all so little has been said because so little can its singular charm and grace be ever spoken in words ; the spell of the terrors of the past which lie so close to the mirth of the present, the sense of the wide sea waste and the wild sea winds which lie so close to the jewelled altars and the porphyry palaces, and the sweet faces of the women of Titian, and the yellow sails of the boatmen of Mazzorbo pushing their fruit and their fish up the market stairs by R'alto.

This is the subtle and marvellous charm of Venice which has not been caught in the words of Consuelo, nor in the volumes of Ruskin, nor in the verse of Musset, nor in the tragedy of Shakespeare, nor in any printed page of human genius save Shelley's.

One evening Guilderoy and Gladys sat before Florian's, with the soft sea-born day fading in faint roseate skies and the people coming up the water stairs and in from the calle, wondering if there would be any music there that night, for the season was as yet early and the air cold after sunset.

'Do you mean that you would prefer Ladysrood to this ?' he asked her incredulously, while the pigeons going to roost circled above the white pinnacles of Sansovino's shrine.

'I could care very dearly for Ladysrood,' she answered with hesitation.

'And I am glad that you should since it belongs to us ; and

I care for it myself. But to prefer it to this ! Think what chilly, misty mornings, what stormy, dusky sunsets it is surely having now. England might be tolerable in the south were it not for two things—its sea-fogs and its Nonconformists. We can keep the Nonconformists outside our gates, but we cannot keep out the sea-fogs.'

'We have fogs here.'

'Ah, but what different fogs ! Light as gossamer, dove-hued like mother-of-pearl, parting to show a rosy sail with a Madonna's crown, or the marble saints of the Salute dome ! My dear, you cannot speak of this fog and of those fogs in the same breath. The one is a film of lace off the Virgin's altars, the other is Hodge's sinock hung up to dry !'

She looked at him with a certain expression which he did not admire.

'And you do not care whether Hodge has a shirt or not ?'

Guilderoy laughed impatiently.

'I care very much when the shirt figures metaphorically as a fog ! My dear child, pray do not become a politician. Become anything else you like that pleases you, but not that. We have too many of them already. We have also already got too many undigested opinions. All opinions require long rumination, only unfortunately it is a process unknown to politicians. You are a very lovely woman, Gladys. You will be handsomer still every year for some time to come. Leave opinions alone, my love. If you must have them, being your father's true daughter, do not spoil your pretty mouth by their utterance.'

A shadow went over her face. She had acute intelligence, and she did not like to be relegated to the level which his words implied.

'Am I only to dress then like a lay-figure ?' she said a little angrily.

'And amuse yourself and look beautiful. Can you want more ?'

'There is so much more in life,' she murmured with timidity.

'In life, there is no doubt. But in yours it is best there should not be more for many a long year. You are so young, and I avow, my dear, that I have a horror of women who study blue-books and correct one's statistics by their own tables. The only office of every woman who can be so is to be charming.'

'I am not charming,' said the girl, with colour in her cheeks.

'You will be. You see I am quite frank with you. In our relations mere compliments are a mistake. You will be infinitely charming when you realise that you are so. At present your power to charm is not more intelligible to you than the

use of a knife to an infant: the infant has not the faintest idea of any difference between the blade and the haft. Nor do you discern between the natural beauties which you possess, which are very great, and those which you can exercise by taking thought, which will be still greater.'

'I do not understand,' said Gladys.

'No,' reflected Guilderoy, 'and that is why the innocent woman is always hopelessly left behind in the race for men's passions. She does not know, and she does not make art supplement nature; and she says what she thinks; and she shows what she feels; and she cries when we would laugh and laughs when we could cry, and is cold when we are hot and then would warm us when we are cold—alas, alas; why is virtue always like that?'

Aloud he said to her:

'You will understand when you go out in the world and meet other women. You will observe then that frequently the women who have least beauty but most charm bear all before them. It is a question of mind, of perception, of sympathies—perhaps of other things less innocent, but certainly of them. A lovely woman with perfect features and form (as you have) will be admired, no doubt, always; but her admirers will pass on unless she has some charm beside her beauty. "Know thyself" was said by a sage for sages, but it is quite as necessary a counsel to give to a lovely woman. You do not know yourself. You are half asleep. Whenever you become a little conscious of your power you are frightened. Well, if your mirror teaches you so little, look at other women and learn from them that you can easily surpass them. I do not intend to shut you up in a cabinet at Ladyswood like a Tanagra figure; I want you to be admired by the world, by my friends, by every one; and to be that you must not be afraid of admiration.'

He had no consciousness of the perils which might lie in the counsels he gave; he was absorbed in his desire to give the setting it wanted to this pearl he had found, and to escape ridicule in the world as the husband of a woman who was in love with him. He spoke in entire sincerity. He did not, indeed, tell her that he found her wanting himself; but he vaguely endeavoured to imply it. She would be none the less innocent if she gained in pliability, in facility, in power of charm, and she would be a million times more interesting, and more easily adapted to the world before her.

'You will have a great deal to do once you are *lancée*,' he continued. 'The life of society is full of small things and of continual stir; it is a *strenua inertia*, but it leaves little time for contemplation. You will find your hours gone before you have begun to count them. Certainly it is very good of you to

wish to be of use to others, but you will not find it easy ; and all the parade of philanthropy which women of rank deal in is rather an insult to the poor than a kindness to them. I do not wish you to be conspicuous in that way ; give all you please, my dear ; give with both hands ; but pray avoid all appearance of political advertisement and sentimental religion. Both are equally offensive to good taste.'

She did not reply ; she looked at the crescents of light which were beginning to kindle along the lines and arches of the Procuratie. She was thinking passionately and painfully, 'If I did not please him why does he not let me alone ?'

'I do not wish to vex you, my child, and youth is always charming,' said Guilderoy lightly, 'but I want you to realise that you are very lovely through the grace of nature, and that you may become still more so by the grace of art. That is all. I would rather teach you this myself than let others teach it you. Your own ideal, I know, is to live at Ladysrood and be kind to Hodge. You shall be as kind to him as you please—though he will like you none the better for it—but you must live in the world, and the world does not care even for Helen unless Helen has her girdle of charms.'

'But if I please you ?'

'Please others to please me,' said Guilderoy aloud. And he thought to himself : 'As men are made, my dear, unless you please others you will, alas ! not please me long.'

'I quite admit, my dear child,' he pursued, 'that a life passed in the country is infinitely easier and infinitely more likely to develop high thoughts and gentle ones. I am convinced that the wretched fretful pessimism, which is the curse of modern art and literature, comes from the men who follow literature and art crowding together in cities, and leading the feverish existence of the clubs and the streets. Their blood grows poor and feeble, and their meditations and views are all tinged with the hypochondria due to bad air, overfeeding, and unending excitement. I am really convinced of it. If cities continue to spread as they have done in the last fifty years, there will not be a book worth reading written, or a picture worth seeing painted. For the majority of men who can never be, and are never, rich or famous, life in great cities must be pent up, jaundiced, deprived of all health, whilst for those who are rich or who achieve fame life in cities means incessant friction, emulation, bitterness, elation, jealousy, and haste. Nothing great or good can come out of the seething cauldron of life in London or Paris, and all good men have loved solitude and nature. Tusculum contributed more than Rome to the genius of Cicero.'

'And yet,' he continued with a smile, 'I who am not Cicero

and am not even a modern poet or novelist or painter, I frankly confess that the life of the world is necessary, and the climate of my own country intolerable to me for nine months out of the year. You will say, or if you do not say you will think, that like so many others I can see what is good yet shun it. Yes : in that I am a man of my generation. In no age more than in our own, I think, did men see more clearly all that life might and ought to be, and fail more utterly in making it even tolerable to themselves.'

He had forgotten that he was speaking beyond the comprehension of his companion ; that she knew nothing of the morbid phthisis of pessimism and the chronic typhoid of unrest. He forgot that the country meant to her only red roses, green grass, a boat on a summer wave, a swing between two orchard trees, pet doves flying in the sunshine, and a pet kid nibbling flowers—all the freedom, the playtime and the sport of eager healthful limbs, which it does mean to all innocent and vigorous early life, whether of the sheep-fold, of the cattle-byre, or of the human race.

She did not contradict him, merely because she did not understand.

'My father lives in the country, and you always say that he is very clever !' she observed after a long silence.

'Your father is above humanity,' said Guilderoy impatiently. 'Nay, forgive me, my dear ; I have the greatest honour and regard for Mr. Vernon, but he cannot be taken as a rule for anybody but himself, for no one else has his wonderful power of self-denial, coupled with the contradictory power of sufficing to himself. He is a *nature d'élite*. I am made of less fine clay. I admit that I weary myself consumedly when I have been a little while in my own company. I have been too used to the movement of the world.'

'I think I weary you, too,' said the girl in her own soul, but she did not utter her thought aloud.

As he spoke he started and half rose from his chair. He saw a lady dressed in black from head to foot coming through the people, followed by a tall footman in amber-coloured livery laced with silver, and accompanied by several young men, and one large Russian greyhound.

'Good heavens !' Guilderoy murmured unconsciously aloud, as he mechanically lifted his hat as she passed him.

She acknowledged the salutation with a slight bow, and passed on through the throng towards the piazza. She did not even glance at his companion.

'Who is that beautiful woman ?' asked Gladys.

Guilderoy did not reply. He had grown pale, and his eyes had a startled look.

'She knows you,' the girl persisted innocently. 'Do tell me who she is!'

'It is the Duchess Sorìa,' he said reluctantly.

'Is she one of those whom I am to imitate?' said the child a little sadly.

'No one could ever be like her,' said Guilderoy hastily; and if his companion had had a little more experience in such matters, she would have heard in his voice that tone with which a man never speaks but of some woman whom he loves, or whom he at least remembers tenderly that he has loved.

She did not understand, but she vaguely comprehended that he did not wish to speak more on the subject.

Very soon afterwards Guilderoy suggested a return to their gondola on the score that the evening was chilly. When they reached his palace he stayed behind to say a few words to the gondolier. The man brought him word an hour later, in answer to his command, that the Duchess Soria was staying at the Palazza Contarini.

Throughout dinner he was abstracted and inattentive. After dinner he paced the long drawing-rooms from end to end impatiently, wondering how he should escape the girl's observation, and go where he wanted to go.

'Might we not go on the water again?' she asked him wistfully. They often went out after dinner, when the moon was full as it was this night; and she had an uneasy sense that he was wearied and impatient of her company.

'It is too cold,' he answered as in a reverie; and he continued to pace up and down the chambers.

'Cold!'—it seemed to her as warm as a midsummer evening in England.

'I think it is too cold for you,' he answered impatiently. 'If you would not mind, I would go out alone.'

Her ear was quick and fine, and caught the accent of petulance at any constraint. With great self-constraint she forbore to notice it.

'Oh, pray go!' she said willingly. 'I am rather tired; I should be glad to rest in my room.'

He did not give her credit for the effort because he did not perceive it: he was only glad that she did not oppose his departure.

'Good-night, dear,' he said with real tenderness, for he was grateful to her, and he kissed her fondly; yet he felt irritated at the kind of obligation inferred by the semi-apology made for his absence.

True, it was no more than courtesy would have made him offer to any woman dependent on him for society and companionship; but the sense that he had to account for his actions

irritated and weighed on him. The sweetness and simplicity with which she accepted his excuses did not soothe away the sense of subjection which fretted him in making them. It is because men feel the necessity to explain that they drop into the habit of saying what is not true. Their explanations cannot be always true ; it is impossible that they should be so. Wise is the woman who never insists on an explanation which if given must be, in the nature of things, either an offence to her or an untruth.

Perhaps more than half the happiness of life, whether in love or friendship, consists in having learnt the art of gliding over, as though it were unperceived, that which we are not desired to perceive. That few women have this delicate art, or possess the self-control and self-negation which are required for its exercise, is a fact which lies at the root of a great deal of human unhappiness and disunion.

The innate delicacy of John Vernon's daughter supplied the place of tact in her, and her mind was too childlike and unsophisticated to harbour jealousy, however vague.

'He would not have chosen me if he had not preferred me to all others,' she would no doubt have said had any Mephistopheles been there to pour into her ear self-doubts and the restlessness of suspicion.

But a vague feeling, which was the most womanlike of any which she had hitherto felt, came over her ; a feeling older and sadder than her years. She thought to herself wistfully, 'Why did he want me with him if he be not happy anywhere with me?'

It was the pathetic, unwise wonder of the woman in a child's heart.

She heard one gondolier cry to the other, 'Palazzo Contarini,' and the oars fell with a gentle splash into the water. She watched the gondola as far as she could follow it with her eyes. The moonlight fell full on the canal, and it was visible until the curve by the Rialto hid it from sight. The slow, soft, noiseless movement, which had something amorous in its languor and carress of the water, was as unlike the abrupt and noisy movement of her boat over the grey, salt water at home, as her present life was unlike her past.

Her elbows rested on the silk cushions which covered the marble and her head rested on her hands ; her eyelashes were wet with tears, she could not very well have said why except that the vague impatience in his tone and the demand on her to be something other than she was seemed to weigh on her heart with a heavy sense of her own inefficiency to content him. His affections were hers ; he had said so a thousand times, and he had proved it as far as a man can do so ; and yet she felt that

he was disappointed in her, impatient of her, wanted her in some way unlike what she was.

She withdrew from the window, and bade her woman shut the casement, though the moon was pouring its radiance through the chamber, as on Christabel's. She was too young to feel jealousy, and too accustomed to obedience to feel rebellious; yet a vague, unanalysed pain was in her heart. Would he be long? she wondered.

## CHAPTER XV.

GUILDEROY meantime went on with a quickly beating heart to the water-gate of the Palazzo Contarini.

'Is it possible that I love her still?' he asked himself uneasily as his boat glided through the green shadowy waters, through the deep black shadows, and the glistening breadths of light where the moonbeams fell. He had thought not. An hour before he would have sworn that he did not.

The noble palace, turning its Gothic buttresses and machicolations to the little canal of the Priuli, towered above him as his gondola touched its water-stairs.

'Take up my name,' said Guilderoy to a servant whom he recognised at the entrance.

He stood on the edge of the steps and waited. The water flowed past him bronze-green in the full moonlight with a melancholy and monotonous sound in its ebb and flow. With one of the strange contradictions of human temper he passionately regretted a privilege which he had abandoned of his own accord; a time when the servants of Beatrice Soria showed him into her presence unannounced and sure of welcome. Of his own free will he had broken off those terms of privileged intimacy, and he knew well enough that he had desired to do so before he had taken the resolve to do it. And yet he regretted, and would have had these privileges once more if he had been able to command them. He despised his own inconstancy, but he could not control its regrets and its forebodings.

He was kept waiting some little time standing there on the top stair, whilst the gondoliers murmured and laughed with one another, and the reflections of the lamps trembled in the water. Then the servant returned and said:

'Will my lord follow me?'

Guilderoy followed him up the steep stone staircase and across the ante-chamber into a large, vaulted, painted chamber



in which the severe beauties of old Venetian art were blent with the luxurious litter of modern taste. The room was faintly lighted from wax candles burning in the wall sconces; the air was odorous with the scent of many lilies of the valley. The Duchess Sorla was reclining on a couch at the further end. As he advanced the room seemed to him endless, the time consumed in passing through it appeared a century. He had never in his life before known the sensation of embarrassment: he knew it now.

She aided him in no way. She turned her head and looked at him as he came towards her, but she did not move until he was quite close to her. Then she raised herself slightly on one elbow and put out her left hand; the one nearer him.

‘My dear friend,’ she said with a little smile, ‘let me felicitate you. I saw Lady Guilderoy on the Piazza. She is very beautiful, but surely she is very young? A *beau défant*; yes, we always say that. It would be *plus beau* if when we were young we had wit enough to know the happiness we enjoyed. When did you come? When will you go away? I have this house for a fortnight. Then I go to Paris, as you know is my habit at this season.’

Guilderoy murmured something, he knew not what. He was so surprised and troubled by the easy indifference of a reception so different to the scene of passionate reproaches for which he had been prepared, that he could not recover his composure. He remained standing, gazing down at her while the colour came and went on his cheek.

She was unmoved; she had been for days prepared for such a meeting. Women are always in extremes. When they lose their self-control they lose it entirely in a terrible abandonment to all their passions; when they are mistress of themselves they are, on the contrary, wholly under the domination of their colder and their more merciless instincts, and all the storms of emotions assail their composure in vain.

‘You never answered my letter,’ he said almost involuntarily. It was what a boy would have said and he knew it, and yet he could not restrain the words.

‘What was the use of answering it?’ she replied in the same even and languid tone. ‘Cosa fatta capo ha.’ What is done is done. You know the proverb.’

‘But it was not done, then!’

‘What did you expect? That I should entreat you for my sake to pause and change your mind? My dear friend, you were very vain.’

‘Vain!’ repeated Guilderoy.

He knew that he could not recall to her passions and affections which he had voluntarily thrown back on her hands. He could

not remind her of her past love for him, when that love had been wholly incapable of retaining his allegiance.

'You must have but a paltry opinion of me,' he said, with a flush of mortification.

'You are not heroic. Men are not heroes except in their own eyes. You wished to marry. You married. There is no more to be said. I hope it may agree with you. It does not agree with most people.'

Guilderoy was silent and embarrassed. For more years than one his greatest emotion with regard to her had been impatience and readiness to dispute with her. He had told himself a thousand times that, without difficulty or danger or novelty or any future good in it, passion became wearisome, and had no power to hold him. And yet, now that this passion was altogether of the past, it allured him back to it. It assumed a thousand hues which it had never worn before.

Had he in truth, he asked himself now, always loved her, though he had disliked her exactions, her despotism, and her caprice? If he had not, how was it that the mere sound of her name, the mere touch of her hand, had had power to awaken so much in him that he had imagined was dead?

She was still reclining on a pile of silk cushions and oriental stuffs; her arms were bare to the shoulder, and with one hand she moved up and down the coils of an emerald bracelet on the other arm. His eyes followed the movement of the jewel up and down the soft pale flesh, polished as ivory, where his lips so often had lingered. Paradise was shut to him now, and he had closed the doors himself, and he regretted it.

She was a very beautiful woman, then eight-and-twenty years old. She was tall and exquisitely formed, whilst her face had the rich hued fairness of Titian's women, warm as a sun-fed fruit. She had the blood of many different races in her veins, Arragonese, Sicilian, Venetian, and French, and she had had for many years all the habits, the experiences, the wisdom, and the charms of a woman accustomed to reign in the greatest of great societies. Her marriage could not be called a happy one, but it was not positively unhappy; she enjoyed a large fortune wholly secured to her, and Hugo Soria was wholly indifferent to what she did so long as she preserved an outward agreement with himself; they appeared in public or at great courts together a dozen times a year, and he and the world were satisfied.

She was not. She was a woman of strong passions and warm affections, which the habits of the world had not destroyed in her. All the heart she had—and it was much—she had thrown into her relations with Guilderoy; and though those relations had before his rupture with her been often strained and marred

by scenes of dissension, they had yet remained the central interest of her life. When the tidings of his marriage had reached her she had received the greatest blow that it is possible for a proud woman to receive. The wildest desires of vengeance had passed through her disordered thoughts, only resisted because they seemed too melodramatic, too common, and too poor. All her empire had crumbled into dust, and she suffered as lowlier and more patient women could not do.

She had not answered his letter because it had seemed to her that there was no answer possible. You do not answer an insult unless you can avenge it. She could not avenge this because she was a woman, and a gentlewoman, and she was conscious moreover that she had often strained his patience to breaking by her exactions and her caprices; that he had excuse if not justification in his effort to secure for his future more peaceable and more fruitful attachments.

So she had replied nothing to his message of farewell; and when now she had been asked to receive him she had consented, and had done so as a friend.

She had no distinct motive or project in her mind; she was actuated partly by pride, which moved her to conceal her wound, and partly by a vague desire not to lose sight of his life altogether.

She broke the silence at last.

'Your wife is very lovely,' she said again. 'Quite an English beauty, but with something more sensitive in it and more suggestive than there is in most English girls' faces. Is she *facile*? Because you are not, my dear friend, and in marriage it is extremely necessary that one at least should be so. She is a child, you say? Yes, I see she is a child at present, but she will not be always a child; and in marriage so very often one is so inconveniently in love for a long time while the other has forgotten and rebels.'

Guilderoy gave an impatient gesture. He had not come there to discuss the philosophy of marriage with the wife of Soria.

'You do not like to talk about her?' said the Duchess.

'There is nothing to talk about; she is very young, and she has seen nothing of the world.'

'The real *ingénue*? It is so strange, but men of the world are so often enamoured of that type; and yet there are few things more tiresome than a mind which is incapable of sympathy, because it has no knowledge and no experience. Some women are tiresome like that all their lives—they are the good women!'

She laughed a little, and added:

‘I will come and see her to-morrow. What hour suits her?’

Guilderoy coloured. He wished to Heaven that they should never meet, and yet it was impossible to prevent it; and perhaps it was merely a folly on his part to feel that sensitiveness about it. The world was full of such meetings.

‘Any hour you will like to name; I will bring her to you,’ he said, with a visible reluctance which his companion did not choose to observe.

‘To-morrow, then, at five.’

Guilderoy bowed. He was thinking to himself—it must be that she cares for some one else, or she could never be so cold?

A swift and hateful suspicion flashed through his mind also. Was it possible that she was in real truth indifferent because already she had replaced him? Was that the explanation of her silence, of her apparent forgiveness? Six months and more had gone by since their last meeting. There was time—more than time—for a woman of the world to have substituted one sentiment for another.

He hated the thought. It seemed impossible to him that the love she had borne him could have already gone elsewhere; and yet had not his own passion faded and been false to her? Had he any title to expect from her a constancy which he had not given?

He sat beside her embarrassed and mute; and she watched him under her dreamy long-lashed eyelids. A great depression came over him like a weight of lead; something seemed suddenly to have gone out of his life and left it blank. For many months he had been used to the thoughts of this woman wholly devoted to himself, and suffering from his absence and his inconstancy. He had rebuked himself and hated himself for what had been in his own eyes the cruelty of his desertion of her. In a passionate scene he would have been at his ease, because he would have had what he expected, what he was used to; but before this cool, languid, half-friendly, half-hostile reception of him by a woman whom he had known alternately furious or tender, exquisitely devoted or violently dominant, he was at a loss what to do or what to say. He longed to fall at her feet and implore her pardon, but he felt afraid lest it should seem to her a greater insult than the original offence. If she chose to treat his marriage as a thing without import or interest to her, it was not for him to force on her memories which should remind her that it had been an infidelity to her which she had every right to resent and to condemn.

She had played with him often when he was really hers; she had created his jealousy and irritated his temper; she had often been wayward, despotic, and disposed to overstrain the great

power which she had at one time possessed. At the beginning his love had been much more passionate than hers, but soon the proportions had been reversed, and gradually, as years went on, it had become on her side much greater than on his own. She had allowed her heart to be drawn into what she had once intended should be only a pastime, and she had, with all the fractiousness of passion, set her soul more and more on her kingdom as she felt that its sceptre was more and more likely to slide with time from her grasp. She had really loved him; and it was the knowledge of that which, when he had thought of her, had moved him to the pain of remorse.

And now he found that all his remorse had been needless, all his self-reproaches the exaggerated apprehensions of vanity; for it was evident that of all indifferent matters his marriage had been the most indifferent to this woman, who for five years had seemed to live only through his love!

A wave of hot anger rose over his soul. He regretted his visit to her. He felt that he was insignificant in her eyes, and he longed to recall to her a thousand things which it was impossible for him even to hint at since she chose to ignore all their past relations. He could not blame her; he had no possible right to do so. He was aware that most men in his place would have been grateful to her for passing over with so much lightness a difficult and embarrassing position. He knew that he ought to be thankful for her forbearance and her indifference, and yet he felt that he would have preferred that she should have upbraided him, reviled him, struck him, done anything to him rather than tell him in that tranquil mode to bring his wife to see her.

‘Women have no real feeling,’ he thought furiously; and if she had met him with reproaches he would have said, ‘Women have no comprehension!’

It was one of those situations in which the man must always be irritated with the woman, let her do what she may, because, as he is conscious of having acted ill to her, her forgiveness or her invective must alike appear a rebuke to him. If she had indeed met him with any of that constancy and fervour of passion which had tired him in her, she would have reconciled him to himself. As it was, he felt, with passionate annoyance at his own weakness, that it was quite possible for him to become in the future as much in love with her again as he had been five years before. He rose abruptly, being afraid of what he might be betrayed into if he sat much longer beside her in the silence of this flower-scented, dimly-lighted, painted chamber, with no sound on their ear except the ripple of the water below the windows, or the distant cry of some passing gondolier. He had had many affections in his life, but in some

ways he had cared more for Beatrice Soria than for any other woman, and cared longer. Now that he was again in her presence, it seemed strange and unnatural that they should meet and part as mere acquaintances. He was a man of tender heart if of variable passions, and he could not wholly restrain some of the emotion which he felt.

‘You will, at least, allow me to be always your friend?’ he murmured, as he bent over her hand.

‘Why not?’ she replied, with a charmed sweetness in the words; but they were wholly calm, and had no answering emotion in them.

He held her hand a moment, then touched it with his lips and left her. The heavy tapestry hanging before the door closed on him. Alone, she rose from her couch with the feverish impetuosity of some wounded animal, and paced to and fro the length of the chamber with quick, nervous, agitated steps.

Strong passions and deep pain, scorn, regret, and desire, and the wrath of a proud nature under insult, all which she had successfully repressed and hidden in his presence, overmastered her in solitude.

As she heard the sound of the oars in the water as his gondola left the palace steps, she threw herself face forward on the cushions of her couch once more, and with her head bowed on her beautiful bare arms she wept bitterly.

She was a woman of the world, and she had worn the mask of the worldly: partly from pride, partly from desire to renew an association which would perforce be severed for ever were any angry words exchanged. She knew that the impetuosity and dominance of her temper had wearied out a love which she had prized more than any other she had ever enjoyed, and she had subjugated her will and subdued her sense of passionate resentment, to make them the slaves of her purpose and her desire to regain her lost influence.

But the reaction was great, and when alone she had no composure to affect, no indifference to simulate, she abandoned herself to the convulsive and unrestrained grief of a woman who is only sensible that she has, for the time at least, lost all which has made existence sweet to her.

## CHAPTER XVI.

THE next day at five o'clock he was not at his ease, and Gladys was timid and silent. The Duchess Soria alone was at her ease ; full of charm and animation, graciously kind, and most brilliant, as she could be when she chose. Nothing could be more admirable than her manner to the young girl, and Gladys looked and listened with a vague perception of what he had meant by his warning to herself on the Piazzetta.

She could never be like this exquisite woman with her perfect grace, her low sweet laugh, her easy gliding from one language to another, her delicate touches of wit which just brushed its subject and left an epigram on it, as though her lips dropped diamonds like the queen's of the fairy story. The sense of her own inferiority made the girl twice as shy and twice as self-conscious as she had ever been before. All the childlike frankness and courage which had been so naturally hers before her marriage had evaporated. She was almost mute, and blushed painfully whenever she was forced to speak.

Guilderoy felt passionately angered against her.

'She will make the other think that I have married a fool !' he said bitterly to himself, with the same restless irritating consciousness that a man feels who has bought a jewel at great price, and sees it subject to the contemplation of a supreme connoisseur in gems, only to be condemned as worthless.

There was a look in the eyes of Beatrice Soria which made him writhe ; not quite derision, not quite contempt, but cruelly hinting both.

'Is it for this you have left me?' said the lustrous and languid glance of those eyes in which he had once seen all his heaven, and was so tempted to see it still.

'What inferior creatures we are to women !' thought Guilderoy. 'We are fools enough to be troubled by what seems to us an equivocal situation, a want of decency or dignity, but a woman carries off any false position with the most consummate ease ; she is never at a loss for brilliant conventionalities, she is never shaken by a consciousness of inopportune memories ; you may have left her chamber half-an-hour before, but she will present you with perfect self-possession to her acquaintances in her drawing-rooms !'

If she had refused to receive his wife, he would have accused her of jealousy, and of the desire to create a painful scene ; he would have said that women carried so far too much earnestness

into passing passions, and desired to give permanence to intimacies which should be evanescent.

But he, who thought that he knew the whole gamut of female emotions, was perplexed to explain to himself, now, the motive and the character of her feelings.

There was an unaffected kindliness and sweetness in her manner to Gladys which was the perfection of acting, if acting it were. The young girl was bewitched and fascinated by it; and, when they had left the Palazzo Contarini, was full of the expressions of her admiration, to which he found it somewhat difficult to reply.

For one moment, as they glided over the water homeward, he felt an impulse to tell her the story of his relations to the Duchess Soria. He felt that it would create a certain confidence and clearness between them; that it would enable her to guide her own conduct and understand his own in the future; but the words were difficult to utter. He had the intimate sense which every man who is a gentleman feels so strongly, that to speak of a woman's passion for himself is a cowardice and a vulgarity. He felt that he should repent it for ever after if he were to be guilty of such an offence against the unwritten laws of honour. Moreover, he was conscious that he could not speak of her with total indifference, because he was not indifferent. And then, again, what would Gladys comprehend? She was such a child: she would probably be disgusted, alarmed, and wholly unable to understand either the confession or his motives for making it. So he kept silence, and merely responded with acquiescence to her repeated interrogations and affirmations of enthusiastic admiration of the grace, the beauty, and the charm of her great rival.

'You will be as charming yourself when you know a little more of the world,' he replied, with a touch of impatience at the last.

'I shall never be like that,' said the girl despondently.

'You do not want to be; you are young; youth has its own charm.'

'But you told me I wanted to improve so much?'

'If I did I was a fool. You need not always take seriously what I say, my dear. Men often have *boutades*; they are only spoilt children. Women are very unwise, and are always very unhappy, who attach too much importance to our idle words.'

Gladys was silent. She was wondering how she was to know when he wished to have his words taken seriously and when he did not. Her father's clear, limpid, straightforward speech had always been so intelligible to her. She had had no experience of the caprices and involutions of speech used only to conceal the speaker's thoughts, or aimlessly to discharge the



doubts and the desires at war in the speaker's mind. But her intelligence and the delicacy of her apprehensions told her that in some way her praise of the Duchess Soria was distasteful to him. She talked of her no more.

After leaving the Palace they had gone down the Grand Canal and out towards the Lido. Venice was at her most beautiful moment (unless, indeed, daybreak be not still more beautiful), the sun was setting behind the city, and the golden glow suffused the water, the sky, the earth, and made the ships and the isles, and the buildings of the Scliaivone look like the translucent images seen in a mirage.

Venice is the heaven of lovers; yet Guilderoy already felt that he had ceased to be a lover as he drifted through the sparkling sunshine or the starry nights by the side of his young companion. When there is absolutely no response, passion soon grows tired alike of its demands and of its persuasions. He had been used to women who studied, stimulated, caressed, and tempted him. She was too young to do the first of these, and too ignorant of her own charms and powers to do the others. He remained wholly unaware of the mingled and contradictory emotions with which this mute soul regarded him. The eloquent expression of passion is more than half its attraction, and the devotion of the heart is useless unless the intelligence is sufficiently awake to unite it to influence.

'I shall not see Madame Soria again?' she said, as the gondola drifted up the canal an hour later, and passed the Contarini Palace, in which the windows were all lighted *a giorno*.

'Why should you want to see her?' he replied with petulance. 'I thought you were shy of strangers. Be quite sure, however, that you will see her, over and over again, in the world.'

He turned his head away as they neared the lighted palace; he hated to think that others were there beside Beatrice Soria, others perchance who had succeeded to the same privileges and the same intimacy which had once been his.

He had voluntarily abandoned them, but he regretted them bitterly now, even as a man might in a fit of passion fling a collar of pearls into the green water of the canal, and regret his act when it had sunk for ever out of sight under the seaweed and the sand.

'Do you intend to be mute for ever, as you were before her, before all my friends?' he said irritably, as they passed under San Giorgio Maggiore, feeling forced to vent his irritation in some way. 'I really cannot understand you, my dear; you have spirit enough when you choose. Do you mean to sit like a country mouse in all London and Paris drawing-rooms? Do you mean to make no effort to attain the tone and the air of

the world you have to live in? You will make me supremely absurd if you remain a mere country girl. In your present position——'

He checked himself, for his good breeding made him conscious that he could not reproach or remind her of social advantages which she had received from himself.

Gladys' eyes filled with tears. Whenever her father had reproved her it had been with gentle gravity and reasonableness, not with petulant irritation like this.

'For Heaven's sake do not do that!' cried Guilderoy, angry with himself, and so still more angered against her. '*Les femmes pleureuses* are my abhorrence. If there be anything on earth I have avoided all my life it is tears!'

'I beg your pardon,' said the girl coldly. There was a menace he did not like in the tone, and he said nothing.

'Will she not be *facile à vivre*?' he thought uneasily; it was the quality he most prized: he had never met with it. His sister did not possess it; Beatrice Soria had not possessed it, nor had any one of the many women he had loved; it seemed to him the one good thing upon earth, chiefly because he had always sought and never found it. And, indeed, in a sense he was right in his estimate, if his estimate sprang from his own selfishness. Of what use is it for those who love us to say that they do so if they cannot bear with our infirmities, pardon our weaknesses, and make the atmosphere of our lives sweet and clear?

'If you would like to go to England,' he said abruptly, 'I have no objection. You can go to the first Drawing-room instead of the second, and we can go to Ladysrood for Whitsuntide. Your father would be pleased, no doubt.'

The warmth with which she thanked him made him feel very insincere towards her. If she could have known his motives for being desirous to leave Venice, she would have seen that consideration of her wishes or of John Vernon's pleasure had very little to do with it.

But ignorance, that kindest friend of trustful natures kept her from such knowledge, and she was grateful and happy.

On the morrow he sent a letter to the Palazzo Contarini, in which he expressed his regret that he was recalled suddenly to England, and must thus lose the honour of seeing the Duchess Soria again in Venice. It flattered Beatrice Soria to learn that he should have left Venice with so much precipitation.

Men only flee from what they fear, not from what is indifferent.

'What is the use of his flying from me?' she thought. 'The world—our world—is so narrow; we must meet again and again in it.'

He had killed what was best and warmest and sweetest in her, as men do without thinking how they destroy the better qualities of women. They think that they have full title to a woman's fealty and forbearance, though they may have shown neither forbearance nor fealty themselves, and they demand from her superhuman virtues at the very hour that they do things to her which would make an angel a fiend. There arose in her now, in the place of her warm impetuous passions, a colder and unkindler passion, which had the patience to wait and the wisdom to affect tranquillity.

## CHAPTER XVII.

'AND Lady Guilderoy, what is she like?' asked an old friend of Lady Sunbury, in a crowded London ball-room.

'She is a charming child, but such a child!' she replied with a sigh.

'You have forgiven her, then?' asked Lord Aubrey, who was standing near.

'There is nothing to forgive. Your advice was sound. It would have been very stupid to quarrel. But if you ask me whether I believe the marriage is for Guilderoy's ultimate peace, I do not.'

'Why?'

'For a thousand reasons. You always repent at leisure when you marry in haste. Then she is too young. A great charm, you say? Yes, but sometimes a very costly one. She will only be happy in the country, and he is only happy in the world. Is he in love, do you say? My impression is that he is not. She is!'

'That is ominous, and early. If he is not, why on earth did he marry?'

'Ah!'

Lady Sunbury moved her fan in a gesture suggestive of her impotence to account for the extravagances of any man. 'Evelyn is very capricious and has *coups de tête* which are often wholly unaccountable. This was a *coup de tête*. Now that he has outgrown its momentary excitement I think he looks at his wife and wonders what he was about.'

'A happy prospect for her.'

'*On s'habitue à tout*,' said Lady Sunbury with little sympathy in troubles of the soul. 'He will always be very kind to her—Evelyn can be unkind to nothing—and he will be very courteous

and generous: if she be reasonable she will not want more; she can enjoy herself in any way she likes. I hope she will be reasonable.'

'How old did you say she was?'

'Seventeen, I think.'

'It is not the age of reason,' said Lord Aubrey, and as he wandered away through the rooms he felt a vague pity for this young girl whom he had never seen, who was to be content with the courtesy of her husband, and with the power of spending money. Most women wanted no more, it was true, but here and there was a woman who did want more, and who having no more was wretched.

Aubrey attended the Drawing-room a few days later with some feeling of curiosity. Presentations seldom interested him. He did not care much for women. But this time he looked on with interest, as Lady Sunbury presented her young sister-in-law.

'She may be a child, but she has the *sangfroid* of race in her,' he thought, as he saw Gladys come before the throne with the same calmness with which she had fronted the Cherriton lads on the Ladysrood moors. She scarcely looked her best, because the Court dress was too stately for her extreme youth, and the Guilderoys' jewels seemed too many and too heavy for her small head and her childlike shoulders to sustain; but she carried herself with perfect grace and repose. She was undisturbed by the novelty of the scene and the magnificence of the crowd; and her cheeks were as cool and her pulse as even as though she had been in the porch under the apple boughs and the ivy of Christ'slea.

'There is the Princess royal in your lovely Perdita,' said Aubrey to Guilderoys.

Guilderoys assented with a smile: he was proud of her and, for the moment, content. Occasionally, as his sister had guessed, he surveyed what he had done with a sense of wonder and vague uneasiness, half troubled even whilst half pleased to find her always before him. But he was well satisfied that she should be his as he heard the murmurs of admiration around him.

'I do not wonder any longer that you married her,' said Aubrey.

'I wonder myself still sometimes,' said Guilderoys. 'But I am disposed to hope that it was the one wise act of a not wise life.'

Aubrey was silent. The wisdom of it did not seem to him so apparent as the temptation to it. He admired his cousin in many things, but in others he blamed, and in others he doubted him. 'He has been a spoiled child of pleasure and of women so long,' he thought, will he understand the fragility of this new thing, or care for it if he do understand it?'

'You are thinking that I shall ill-treat her,' said Guilderoy, annoyed by what he fancied the other's silence meant. 'I assure you everyone has prophesied the same, even her father and my sister. I do not know why: I have not been in the habit of ill-treating women.'

'You have been in the habit of leaving them,' said Aubrey. 'Sometimes that comes to the same thing.'

They were at that moment separated by the crush, and Guilderoy was spared the trouble of denial or reply.

Aubrey had at no time very much patience with his cousin. Laborious and self-denying, strongly patriotic and accepting a vast amount of responsibilities which he hated because he believed them not to be conscientiously avoided, he viewed with impatience the useless brilliancy of Guilderoy's intelligence, its scholarly indolence and its ingenious sophisms. The very inward sense which he sometimes could not help feeling that Guilderoy was right enough in his easy-going pessimism and his epicurean choice of the paths of life, only served to make him the more impatient of a man who was theoretically so selfish and yet practically so wise.

'Evelyn has been so spoilt by fortune,' Lady Sunbury said to him once.

'No doubt,' replied Aubrey, but in himself he felt that circumstances had conspired to spoil himself quite as much, but had not similarly succeeded, because his natural indolence had been striven against by a strong sense of the responsibilities of position.

'I do not know that I have done any good,' he thought honestly enough, 'but at least I have not been idle.'

He went home from the Drawing-room that day with a vague sense of pity for the girl he had called Perdita. His pity was no doubt absurd enough; the world would have told him so certainly, and yet he could not avoid the sense of it.

'Evelyn will not make her happy, because he will not be happy with her,' he thought. 'We cannot give what we do not possess.'

'I regret to disagree with you,' he said an hour later to his cousin Hilda in her own house. 'I am charmed with his wife, but the marriage will not be happy; she will not be contented with dressing exquisitely and spending money.'

'Then she will be very ungrateful,' said Lady Sunbury, whose pride was pinched day and night by want of adequate means to meet the demands of her position. 'I seriously believe that the only one grave and hopeless ill in life is want of money; it brings about all others, it poisons every hour, and it makes good temper absolutely unattainable. This girl is a **baby**, and sentimental. She will possibly cry her eyes out because he

looks five minutes too long at another woman. But when that stage has passed, as it always passes, she will grow sensible of the advantages of always having her bills paid without question.'

'That will depend on whether her temperament is susceptible of delight in running up bills.'

'Every woman has *that* temperament. Pray do not irritate me any further. I opposed the marriage absolutely so long as it was of any use to do so ; it was an absurd one, a caprice, a folly. I have only accepted it to prevent the world talking, and because I cannot quarrel for life with the head of my family ; but I do not profess to approve of it, and if she is to be made into a sentimental heroine as a *femme inconnue* I shall detest her. She has had an immense, a most amazing, piece of good fortune, I beseech you do not irritate me by pitying her for it !'

'I certainly will not irritate you,' said Aubrey, who knew that she could irritate herself unaided.

Lady Sunbury, though she had become reconciled, believed no more in the wisdom of this marriage than she had done when she had been its most dogged opponent.

'I know him,' she continued to her cousin, 'and I know that he is one of those men who, without in the least intending it, make women as wretched ultimately as they make them radiantly happy at the onset. My brother has not a harsh fibre in his whole nature (he says that I absorbed them all), but whether I did or not he has none ; yet I am quite sure that he renders every woman he loves much more unhappy than many colder and worse men do.'

'Because he ceases to care so soon ?'

'Partly that, and partly because there is that about Evelyn which women cannot forget. He will not understand why they do not forget as completely and as easily as he does, and so there is wretchedness.'

'That was with his amours, but surely here——'

'His marriage is in feeling only an amour too ; only an amourette. When he has come to the end of it he will be supremely astonished to find that it leaves restraints and obligations upon him which amourettes have not.'

'Perhaps he will get rid of them also.'

'You cannot get rid of marriage. Unless your wife disgraces herself you can never get rid of it.'

'In our day it is at least worn lightly if not got rid of, yet it is always there,' said Aubrey. 'You are like a prisoner who has given his parole and goes wherever he pleases ; he walks and wanders where he will, and he can saunter, or sit, or sleep, or swim ; and the sun and the rain fall on him, and he sees all the living world and the wide horizon, but he has given his parole to go back, and it is all poisoned for him.'

‘In marriage at least the parole is not often kept,’ said Lady Sunbury.

At six o’clock Aubrey went and called on his cousin’s wife in the great Palladian mansion which had ever since it was built been the town house of the Guilderoy family. It was a noble house in its way, with a staircase of black and white marble, and ceilings by Italian artists of the period, and stately reception rooms which had seen many generations of fine gentlemen and fine ladies pass through them like painted shadows on a wall. He found the girl alone in a little cabinet hung with French paintings of the Watteau and Lancret time, and in which every chair, table, and console and guéridon were now heaped with roses. She looked pale amidst the brilliant flowers and the sparkling pictures; her eyes had still the dreamy, half-awake look which had fascinated Guilderoy, but they had a look of fatigue as well.

‘I hope you will let me greet you as a relative as I could not do at the palace just now,’ said Lord Aubrey; and he bent his head and lightly touched her cheek with his lips. He pitied her intensely; it was wholly absurd that he should do so, and he knew it, and yet he could not resist the impulse of compassion. He could understand all that she felt of bewilderment, of fatigue, of shyness, and of apprehension before this new life which had descended on her with such startling suddenness and splendour.

‘You must have thought us all boors not to come to your marriage,’ he continued, ‘but it was your father’s and Evelyn’s desire to have none present. We did not even know on what day it was. I am so glad, my dear, that I am the first to see you. We must be great friends, as well as cousins. Will you allow me that honour?’

She smiled. Her smile was still the spontaneous, unstudied, glad smile of a child. She felt grateful to Aubrey, and the sound of his voice and the pressure of his hand seemed to her full of kindness and protection.

‘Did I do right to-day, do you know, at the Court?’ she asked him. ‘I think he was satisfied, was he not?’

‘If he were not,’ began Aubrey,—then checked himself, and answered quietly, ‘You did perfectly, and it was a great ordeal; it was so crowded. You have never seen anything of this London world of ours, I think?’

She shook her head.

‘I want to go to Ladysrood. They brought me all these roses to make it feel like the country. He told them to do it, but it is not the least like the country. I should die if I stayed here.’

Aubrey smiled.

'This time next year you will tell me there is no place like London. All women say so.'

'I shall not. It is noisy, dark, and ugly.'

'It is not beautiful, certainly; but there are many beautiful things to be found in it, and this house is one of them. You will get fond of it in time. At present I daresay you feel like a caged bird. Your jewels tired you, did they not, to-day?'

'Yes, they were very heavy.'

Aubrey sighed a little as she spoke.

'So is rank.'

She looked at him with curiosity.

'You are *the* Lord Aubrey, are you not?' she asked.

'What do you mean, my dear? No one else has that title, if you mean that?'

'No; I mean that I have heard my father praise you. I have heard him say that if the English nobles were all like you they would have no reason to fear the Deluge.'

'That was very good of your father,' replied Aubrey, pleased and touched. 'I suspect the Deluge would come all the same if all the saints and heroes of Christendom filled our order.'

'He does not think that it would.'

'He is happy enough to live out of the sphere of practical politics,' said Aubrey with a smile.

'For heaven's sake do not speak to her of politics,' said Guilderoy, entering the room. 'She has a terrible bias towards them already, and I insist that lovely women should have nothing to do with social questions.'

'Her roses suit her better, certainly,' replied Aubrey, as his eyes rested on her with a wistful contemplation.

'That child will be very unhappy if she loves him, and probably equally unhappy if she does not,' he thought, as he took his leave, and went on his way to the House of Commons.

She interested him. He saw much farther into her nature after half-an-hour's conversation with her than Guilderoy had seen of it after three months of the most intimate association with her.

'He has certainly given her everything that a man can give,' thought Aubrey, 'and yet I suspect he will never give her the one thing which such a woman as she will become will chiefly want.'

Aubrey had little time or inclination in his career to study the intricacies and fragilities of women's temperaments, but he was a man of quick sensibilities and of swift penetration.

He believed in feeling, though the world thought him a cynic. Politics had absorbed most of his own life, and the emotions had not enjoyed much play in it. But perhaps for that reason his sympathies, when they were aroused, had a great



freshness in them. People in general were afraid of him, for his wit could be bitter and unsparing ; but children or dogs were never afraid.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

‘WELL, my dear, what do you think of life?’ said John Vernon to his daughter, when Guilderoy and Gladys went to Ladysrood for Whitsuntide.

Gladys was standing in the little study. She wore a grey dress with a broad hat, with long ostrich feathers drooping over it ; she had a silver belt round her waist, long gloves, and one very large pearl at her throat, with a few pale tea roses. It was only two months since she had left Christslea, and yet she looked to him utterly changed ; as changed as though she had been absent for years. She hesitated a little and coloured. It would have been wholly impossible to her to find words for the curious mingling of great joy and of apprehensive disappointment which her marriage had brought to her : the vague sense which she was possessed with that love was at once bitter and sweet.

John Vernon saw the embarrassment she felt, and regretted it. He would have been better satisfied by some youthful outburst of undoubting enthusiasm and ecstasy.

‘You have quite a look of the world already,’ he continued, with a smile. ‘What a toilette of Paris will do for a child ! If it were not too rude to a peeress, I would tell you, my dear, that you are actually grown ! And so you wished for our rough seas and leaden skies, even in Venice ? That was very sweet and faithful of you. And yet I think I would sooner hear that you had never thought of us there.’

‘I should have been very thankless not to think,’ she said, still with a heightened colour on her cheeks. ‘Things seemed so much simpler, too, when I was here,’ she added, after a little pause.

‘No doubt they did, since you saw nothing but the poultry and the pigeons,’ said her father with a smile : whilst he thought, ‘It is very early for your difficulties to have begun, my poor little princess !’

‘In what way does your life seem to have any perplexity ?’ he asked aloud ; ‘and when you feel any do you not take your puzzles to Guilderoy ?’

‘I think it would tease him if I did.’

'Ah ! Then don't do it, dear. Never worry any man. We are fretful creatures, with more nerves than women, though we pretend to have none. My dear Gladys, I was so much opposed to your marriage while you were so young, because I knew that it would not be only a garden of roses for you. There are the roses, no doubt, but there are the briars too. You have the pleasures of life, my love, and you must pay for them with the pains. What is it pains you most ?'

'I am not sure'—and he saw that she was speaking the truth—'I am not sure that anything pains me. Only I fancy that I am not quite what he wants, what he wishes.'

'So soon !' murmured Vernon with a sigh. 'I daresay that is imagination, my dear,' he said, repressing what he felt.

'When the first ardours of love subside they always leave a vague disappointment because the fever heat of them cannot be sustained. You are now feeling the reaction which follows them as invariably as evening follows day. If you wish to be really happy, my child, do not doubt and do not analyse. Self-examination is very apt to grow morbid. It has its uses, but it may very easily have its abuses too. You have the faults of youth and inexperience, no doubt, but I do not think they are very grave ones, and they will mend with time.'

She was silent some moments. Then she took off her hat and pushed back the hair which hung over her forehead.

'Father, do tell me,' she said in a very low voice, 'how shall I ever know if he really loves me ?'

'My dear child !'

John Vernon was startled and dismayed ; he had had his own doubts as to the ultimate happiness of the union, or rather he had had no doubt of it, but a profound conviction that it would bring little happiness to either of them in the end. But he had not expected any shadow to fall quite so soon across the garden of roses, across the brightness of the morning light. He scarcely knew what to say to her.

'Can you doubt it, dear ?' he replied evasively. 'Surely you cannot. No man can have given greater proof of it than he. If he had not loved you greatly, why should a man of his high position and powers to charm have taken the trouble to woo a little country girl without a penny to her fortune ? I think you do Lord Guilderoy injustice and dishonour by your doubt.'

She gave a little sign of dissent, faint and sad and incredulous.

'He might think he loved me,' she said in a very low voice. 'He might think so and then find it was not true—how shall I know ? How do women know ?'

'Good God ! What can he have let her see or feel to put

such a cruel fancy in her mind already?' thought Vernon as he looked at her in trouble and anxiety of spirit.

He did not know what to say to her, and he was afraid even to show the anxiety he felt lest it should increase a feeling already morbid and possibly baseless.

'Do you care for him?' he said abruptly, looking her full in the face.

'Yes.'

A blush rose over her face, and her eyes fell under his gaze. For the first time he failed to see entirely into her thoughts, but he saw that she was very much changed. Possession, which often weakens and chills the heart of the man, usually awakens and enchains the heart of the woman. She had been a child without any knowledge of love on the day when John Vernon had given her hand to Guilderoy; but now, however young she was in years, she was a woman in feeling.

He laid his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead.

'Then, my dear,' he said, gravely, 'do not ask yourself what is, or what is not, the measure of his love. Make yours so great, and keep it so patient, that it shall be a treasure he can never get elsewhere; so only will you ever attain or bestow real happiness. Do not analyse either love or happiness too much. They are like flowers, like butterflies—they die beneath the lens of the microscope.'

Gladys looked up at him in silence; her face was grave and pale.

He could not tell whether she were satisfied or dissatisfied, whether she believed in happiness or had already ceased to expect much of it. They said no more, and spoke of other things. Much as he longed to know all the innocent secrecies of her mind, John Vernon would not aid her to continue a self-examination which might so easily become self-torture. He knew that women are at all times over-fond of self-contemplation, and analysis of themselves and of the affections they receive and return.

Men are not so fond of it; their greater activity and more frequent pleasures make them usually impatient when they are forced to much self-examination, and their moral record is rarely clear enough for them to care long to look at it. But women have a passion for moral vivisection, and spend many an hour of torment, turning in and out, and stripping bare the delicate nerves of their own organisations. He wished to check his daughter on the threshold of this laboratory of the imaginations and affections.

The great advantage of a great position is that it leaves little time for such dangerous meditations. Society may not be very elevating or very ennobling, but its demands and its diver-

sions, even when they become tedious, fill the mind and leave small space for self-contemplation. In many ways it is an evil, and it is unfavourable to the growth of great thoughts ; but it is also an aid to happiness, or to such near likeness to happiness as most human lives attain, and John Vernon was unselfishly glad that the world would, if perforce, surround his child so completely. Love can make its own world in a solitude *à deux*, but marriage cannot. He knew that.

Why must the two be divorced? Gladys would have asked him wistfully.

He would have answered her, or probably he would have been too merciful to answer her, that love and certainty can never dwell long together ; and the foe that every woman has to dread most utterly is habit—habit which makes the nostrils insensible to the perfume of the rose, and the ears unconsciously of the melody of the fountain.

## CHAPTER XIX.

‘You are twenty-one years of age to-morrow, are you not?’ said Aubrey to his cousin’s wife one autumn day on the terrace of Ladysrood.

‘Yes ; it seems very old.’

She sighed as she spoke. Aubrey laughed, then he sighed too.

‘It is very sad if you can feel it to be so,’ he said seriously.

‘I do. I feel quite old. I suppose a woman who is not’—she was about to say ‘not happy,’ but checked herself and said instead, ‘who has lost her children can never feel young.’

‘Not young at twenty! My dear Gladys, you must be jesting, though it is a very sad jest.’

‘Oh no. I am not jesting indeed,’ she replied.

Aubrey looked at her with curiosity and tenderness. ‘Happiness is a matter of temperament,’ he said vaguely.

‘I suppose so.’

‘Who should feel young if you do not? So young in years as you are, with perfect bodily health, and all wishes of your heart satisfied except one, which no doubt will be satisfied ere long?’

She did not answer.

She was thinking how surely on the morrow she would find some superb jewel which she did not want lying on her table as a birthday gift from her lord ; and how equally surely when she

should meet him later in the morning there would be the indifference in his caress and the conventionality in his congratulation, which may be concealed as completely and as perfectly as kindness and courtesy can conceal them, but which yet show through these as plainly as the gilded copper shows in a little while through the thin gold. How much more feeling would there be in Aubrey's brief warm greeting, or the little Latin poem which her father would be sure to send up to her at morning, penned on parchment in the style of the Latin booklets, rolled on the *umbilicus* with carved ivory ends, and made as completely like such a little messenger of the Cæsars' times as scholarship and love could make it!

What a difference! Oh, what a difference! though the little booklet would only have cost a few hours' labour, and the great jewel two or three thousand guineas!

'Do you think anybody's wishes are ever granted?' she said now.

Aubrey hesitated to reply.

'Yes; I think they are. Very often we do not like them when we get them, but that is not the fault of fate who has humoured us with our selected toys.'

'Have you had your wishes?'

'No; for I always wished before everything for a strictly private life, wholly beyond all possibility of comment or interference from the world. As it is I have the felicity of being one of those people who cannot move a step without reporters being after them, which to me so absolutely poisons all existence that I could willingly change places with any one of my hinds at Balforns.'

'Publicity is the twin of Demos,' said Guilderoy, hearing the last words as he approached them. 'Between them they will make life altogether insupportable to the man of talent of the future. No one will do anything even in the very least excellent or original, because of the penalty of the public pillory which will await it.'

'That I believe,' said Aubrey. 'But it is, I suppose, only the market place of Athens or Syracuse over again, with osticism or petalism.'

'There were at least unknown worlds to which to migrate then,' said Guilderoy. 'You were, I believe, trying to teach Gladys more enjoyment of such a world as we have. I wish you could succeed. Who is it has said that beauty smileless is as a fair landscape without light?'

She had walked a little way from them in the autumn sunshine.

'She has had a great sorrow,' said Aubrey. 'The sort of sorrow a woman feels acutely though we do not.'

'That I quite understand,' said his cousin with some ennui. 'But all that kind of feeling passes with time; she is very young; she might be gayer and happier if she chose, very naturally I think and with great advantage. The world would like her better. It does not like serious women.'

'Is she so very serious?'

'Can you doubt it? She takes everything seriously: society, duty, pleasure, fortune, even myself, whom no woman ever took seriously without regretting it!'

He laughed as he spoke, but Aubrey smiled more sadly.

'She stands in a serious relation to you.'

'Unfortunately.'

The word escaped him without thought. She returned nearer to them at that moment, the pale autumn sunshine shining on her uncovered head, and her slender white throat disclosed by a high lace collar, like those in Marie Antoinette's portraits, opening in front with a knot of gardenias closing it on her breast.

She looked older than her years. It seemed to her as if she had lived half a century since she had left Christslea on the day of her marriage, now nearly four years before, when her father had walked through the golden gorse, wishing that it might be a symbol of her future life.

She was famous as one of the patrician beauties of England.

For the world she had just that mixture of success and of failure which made Guilderoy at once gratified and irritated.

Her great beauty could not be contested; the 'grand manner' which had come to her instinctively was perfect in its high breeding and comeliness. Society followed, imitated, and crowned her. But she was not liked; men thought her cold, women considered her rude; everyone who knew her was jealous of her or offended by her in some way or another. The world, like her husband, did not find her 'facile,' and in the frivolities and crazy caprices of the society of the close of this century she was alienated and stood aloof. She had been made a leader of fashion without being even aware that she was so. A colour or a flower, a mode or a place, which she selected became at once celebrated by her choice of it. There is great caprice in all forms of fame, and in none more so than in the fame which society awards to one of its members.

Society had never found anyone so profoundly ignorant of fashion as she was when she first appeared in it; and it had seen no one so little penetrated by its temper and its homage as she still was; out of the very spirit of contradiction it made her one of its sovereigns, though the sceptre it offered seemed to her not of as much worth as any stalk of a bulrush growing by the mere of Ladysrood.

When a woman is happy she can be elastic and sympathetic even to what she dislikes; happiness gives suppleness, softness, and indeed force to the character as sunshine ripens and mellow fruit.

But she was not happy; she loved her husband passionately, and she had from the earliest days of their union been conscious that he was impatient and weary of her. She could not console herself with small things as women usually can do. She cared scarcely at all for her position, her influence, the pleasures of the world, or the extravagance of her toilettes; and the flatteries she received produced no more impression on her than the beating of the rain against her carriage panels as she went to Court.

She had given birth to two male children, but one had died before birth and the other a few months afterwards. It was supposed by those who knew her that her want of interest in all which went on around her was due to this disappointment, but it was not that only which made life void of satisfaction to her. The greatest suffering of her life arose from the fact that her fine and penetrating intelligence could not let her be blind to the discovery that whatever sensual or sentimental desire had hurried Guilderoy into his marriage, she was now absolutely nothing in his existence; nay, was even perhaps something which perpetually annoyed and irritated him by the mere sense that she was there, for ever, in his existence.

Outwardly, however, all was still well.

'Your melancholy predictions are happily falsified, you see,' he said to John Vernon one day, who hesitated a moment before he replied.

'I am sincerely glad to hear it.'

'Your tone is sombre and incredulous, and I fear you doubt it still?'

'I am afraid that of marriage, as of men, one is forced to say, "Call it not happy till its end is seen."'

'What, after all, is happiness? George Sand has best defined it, "*C'est un éclair qui traverse les brumes monotones de la vie.*"'

'That is surely rather descriptive of ecstasy? The ecstasy which, in the nature of things, must have the lightning's brief duration as it has its brilliancy. Happiness, I have always held, is rather a matter of our own individual temperament than of circumstances or of the passions.'

'A philosopher's view; true, no doubt, of philosophers, hardly of mankind in general, of womankind certainly not true.'

'No, women are the creatures of the emotions; a cold word, a letter a day late, a sigh which they overhear and think is not for them, suffices to make them wretched. I hope you do not

find Gladys over-sensitive? I could hardly myself tell whether she were or not. She was a child, and there was nothing to rouse her feelings unless it were a stray dog or a fisherman's boat that foundered.'

'No, I do not think she is impressionable,' replied Guilderoy. 'She is certainly not impassioned.'

'Ah!' Vernon looked at him with a little sigh. 'What did I tell you? She was years too young.'

'One is glad of a certain coldness in one's wife. Coldness is not the word I ought to use, however; there is an absence of passion in her; I do not regret it; it is a great shield in the world.'

'You would regret it if you loved her,' thought Vernon. 'Or rather if you had really loved her you would have taken pains to conjure it away. I daresay you alarmed her at first with the violence of your ardours, and then you chilled her with the carelessness of your tepid affections, and between the two the soul in her is scared and shuts itself up like an oyster, closing its shell on its pearl.'

He was not more satisfied than he had been before their marriage.

It seemed to him that the acquiescent contentment of Guilderoy might very easily drift on into mere indifference, and if the heart of Gladys were now still asleep it would assuredly awake some day.

'How fatal is marriage!' he thought. 'A man sees a woman, a woman a man; with no knowledge, no experience of each other, very often without even any affinity, they enter into the closest of all human relations and undertake to pass their lives together. It is the habit of its apologists to say that it works well, idiotic though it looks. It does not work well. It hurries men and women blindly into unions which often become absolutely hateful to them, stifling to their development and intolerably irritating to their inclinations. It flies in the face of all the laws of sex. It is a figment of the social code, irrational, unreal, and setting up a gigantic lie as the scaffolding which supports society. Nominally monogamous, all cultured society is polygamous; often even polyandrous. Why is the fact not recognised and frankly admitted? Why do we adhere to the fiction of a fidelity which is neither in nature nor in feeling possible to man? Because property lays its foundations most easily by means of marriage, therefore the individual is sacrificed to property. I confess that it makes one almost side with the Socialists.'

'It is not very long since you came here on the wings of a headlong and unconsidered desire,' he said aloud. 'You have had your desire; can you honestly declare that you are any the happier for it?'



Guilderoy was embarrassed. He was naturally sincere.

'If I be not,' he said with effort, 'the fault is certainly my own, and no one else's.'

He knew that he infinitely regretted his marriage, but he could not say so to John Vernon.

He regretted it for five hundred reasons which were for ever rising up in his memory. He regretted it because he was impatient of its obligations, and he received none of the compensation which he had anticipated. His wife was lovely, admired, and perfect in her manner in the world; but he did not believe that she had any single opinion or feeling in common with him. She gave him the constant impression that she disapproved of all he said and all he did; she was neither pliant nor facile; she obeyed all his wishes invariably, but there was something about her passive obedience which irritated him more than any refusal could have done. Physically, he had tired of her as absolutely as though she had had neither youth nor loveliness, and, mentally, he had early concluded that her nature and character were wholly unsuited to his own.

After all, it was the common doom he thought; no marriages were happy, the utmost that the best of them became was a mutual agreement to make the best of a mistake. And little by little, every day and every hour, she became less and less in his thoughts, of less importance in his projects and wishes, of less influence on his temper and temperament, of less prominence in his life and his feelings. On the whole it had been a failure, and he knew it, but he was always desirous that his society and his friends should be as much blinded to the fact as was possible. He was careful of every observance and consideration for her before the world; for to think that the world ever talked of their union as infelicitous would have been still more intolerable to him than the infelicity itself.

And yet he was aware that he had a great deal to be proud of in the woman who bore his name, and a great deal to be grateful for in that pride and delicacy in her character, which would, he was sure, prevent her from ever jeopardising his honour or her own.

'*On a les défauts de ses qualités,*' he thought often. 'If she had been more impressionable and more facile to me, she would have been so to others as well as to myself.'

A man's error. One of the many errors which are very common to men, and stand for ever between them and their true comprehension of women.

Sometimes, when he was in a contented mood, he told himself that it was as well as he could have hoped; she was much handsomer than most; high-bred in manner and feeling; and, if too silent, her silence at least preserved her from the *caque-*

tages and imprudences which compromise socially so many women. If she spoke little, she at least spoke well when she did speak. She looked admirably effective in any one of his houses ; whether at Ladysrood, or in London, Paris, or Venice. She had that look as of an old portrait, a Reynolds, a Gainsborough, a Mignard, or a Giorgione, which makes a woman accord with old and picturesque and stately residences.

On the whole it might have been worse, he often told himself ; but then this resignation is not the language of happiness.

‘You always saw the Princess in Perdita,’ said Hilda Sunbury once to her cousin Aubrey ; and he answered, ‘Yes ; it was very easy to see that. I think the heart is always Perdita’s, always sighing a little for the shepherd’s hut, and the pressed curds, and the oaten cake.’

‘What a simpleton if she is !’ remarked Lady Sunbury, who had no patience with shepherds or for those who sighed for them. ‘Because she has not even the very smallest of stones in her shoe, she goes miles out of her way to pick up one to put in it !’

‘What pebble does she pick up ?’ asked Aubrey.

‘How should I know ?’ said Lady Sunbury. ‘She picks up ever so many, I believe. The most impossible thing of all is that she is sentimentally in love with Evelyn. As if there could be ever anything surer to drive him headlong away from her ! He has been a man of many, many caprices, but nothing would ever be so appalling to him as to be loved with anything approaching a *grande passion*. He cannot endure worry ; he abhors the expression of anything like strong emotion. He is amiability itself as long as you do not fatigue him, or bore him ; but the moment you do either he puts a cross against your name and avoids you. If she does not understand that, he will avoid her. Avoid her permanently ! He was never in love with her. His fancy was captivated and his obstinacy was charmed by the idea of marrying what he admired and I disliked. That was all. He thought her lovely and he wished for her ; her loveliness has lasted, but his wishes have not lasted with it.’

‘Who was it said that in a year it is just the same to you whether your wife is Venus or a Hottentot ?’ said Aubrey. ‘I do not go quite so far as that, but I am certain that Venus, when she can always be had, does cease to seem beautiful to her possessor. I once asked an Austrian abbot if he could ever weary of the view before his windows over the Danube ; it was so beautiful ; and the abbot said to me, “Dear Sir, I have looked at that view so long that it seems marvellous to me you can find any beauty in it at all !” That is human nature, in a monastery and out of it.’

Lady Sunbury was a woman who had no illusions, and she was extremely angry with people who were silly enough to nourish them. They seemed to her the most useless things in the world; exorbitant in their demands, baseless in their formation, and foredoomed before their birth to disappointment. Material advantages were, after all, what really mattered, she thought; ease, affluence, and influence the only real enjoyment of existence; and she—whose whole life for twenty years had been made painful and irritating to her by financial difficulties, by conjugal quarrels, by standing the helpless witness of extravagance and folly, repeated from father to son, and all the incessant mortifications which await the contrast of a great position with a narrow fortune—felt no patience with what appeared to her the mere sentimental childish imaginary sorrows of her young sister-in-law: they seemed to her like weeping for the moon.

‘I believe you encourage her in her delusions,’ she added.

‘I do not see her enough to encourage anything, good or bad,’ said Aubrey.

It was not strictly true. Whenever his cousin was in England he saw his cousin’s wife, and found time to do so even when his crowded and harassed life could ill afford the few spare hours in it to any mere personal interest. She had interested him on the first day that he had called on her in the Watteau cabinet amongst the roses, and had found her tired of the weight of her jewels and of the darkness and noise of the great capital.

Many times during the London season he put aside weighty labours to find moments for her boudoir, and when he had no day for anyone else he would always take one, amidst the stress of political excitement, to pass a few hours at Ladysrood whenever his cousin was there. He was a man of strong feeling which slumbered underneath the prosaic cares of a political career. His imagination was still alive; and he had a vague consciousness that he was watching the opening scenes of a story which might possibly turn some day to tragedy, whenever he found himself associated at any of the great gatherings of Ladysrood, or listened to any expression of divergent opinion between Guilderoy and his wife.

‘She might be perfectly happy from one year to another,’ continued Lady Sunbury irritably. ‘Has she no idea of all that she owes to Providence for having given her a companion who is good-tempered and a purse which is full? Does she expect a Prince Charming like my brother to sit always at her feet? Does she think that because she has married him all other women cease to exist for him? Does she expect to make a

homing pigeon of a migratory nightingale? She must be a fool, absolutely a fool !’

‘No, she is not that ; not that by any means,’ said Aubrey ‘She is only a woman—very much in love, very ignorant of life, and totally unable to understand the caprices and vagaries of the male temperament.’

‘Well, if that goes on she will be a fool,’ said Hilda Sunbury. ‘You will admit so much? How can she live in the world day and night as she does and not learn something?’

‘Perhaps she will learn more than he will like, some day.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What I say. I do not mean anything especial ; but I think as a general rule women who have two grains of sense do not continue jealous of a man who is indifferent to them, but rather turn the tables and give him cause for jealousy.’

‘Is that the advice you will give her?’

‘I shall not give it her certainly, but you may be sure a great many men will.’

‘And do you think she will take it?’

‘I should say that would entirely depend on her mood of the moment.’

‘On her mood : not on her principles?’

‘My dear Hilda—*point de phrases*!—that sense of principle resists in a woman all temptation from without only just as long as it is not tempted from within. So long as she is still in love with Evelyn he will be safe, unless in a moment of pique she revenges herself in the endeavour to make him feel ; but the instant she ceases to care,— Well, I do not suppose that the Guilderoy scutcheon will then be the religiously sacred thing to her which it appears to you. I have great belief in the affections of women, but I have no belief in what is termed their virtue. I mean that they are to be controlled through the one, not through the other. Moralists say that a soul should resist passion. They might as well say that a house should resist an earthquake.’

‘What a doctrine!’ exclaimed Lady Sunbury, shocked.

Aubrey looked at her with a smile. ‘Oh, there are souls which are passionless, no doubt, as there are houses which are not built over a volcanic current,’ he said, and thought to himself:

‘What should you know—you thoroughly excellent and most irritating of Englishwomen? What should you know? Your whole soul has been centered in externals, in ceremonials, in social dignities, in social duties, bound in the buckram of routine, and stiff with the starch of position. What should you know of all the great passions which make life bloom like a Sicilian pasture in flower in May, only often to lay it waste

under lava, as Etna pours fire and stones over the asphodels and the irises?’

But he did not say so; she would have thought him mad; and she, like the world, knew nothing of the tragedy in his own life which made him so infinitely pitiful to all woes of the passions and emotions; she, like the world, thought him a man without a grain of romance in his nature.

Aubrey perceived, what his cousin did not take the trouble to see, that Gladys was not happy: was depressed by an affection—very strong on her part once, very slight on her husband’s—and was restrained at once by pride or by shyness from ever expressing anything which she felt.

She was not demonstrative by nature, and if she had been so she would have hesitated to risk wearying Guilderoy by the expression of what she felt was indifferent to him. The demonstrations of his passion had not lasted long; they had left her with remembrance of a fervour and a phrenzy which she could never forget, and which made the mere mechanical caresses of habit wholly intolerable to her. If she had never been loved in this way she might have lived contentedly without it; but the intoxication of those first weeks in Venice had taught her all that love could be. To become after then merely the mistress of his house, merely the rarely remembered object of conventional embraces, was to her an unendurable torture. She appeared to him cold when her whole senses and emotions were writhing under the carelessness and indifference of his.

‘He only recollects my existence now and then because he wishes for children,’ she felt bitterly. He was always courteous, kind, and gentle; but as every month passed away she felt more and more that he had never really cared for her. He had married her out of caprice, passing admiration, fancy for what was new and strange to him, and the sense that he must some day marry or see his title and estates pass to persons whom he detested. Her clear and quick comprehension taught her this very soon, and occasional phrases which she overheard from the women most intimate with him confirmed her knowledge. She felt that those who liked her pitied her, whilst those who liked him, the far larger number, regarded her with something more disdainful than pity. The sense of that gave her a calmness quite foreign to her nature, and a strength of self-repression injurious at her years.

She had had everything to learn of the world into which she was launched; but she soon became acquainted with its intricacies, its meanings *à demi-mot*, its profound heartlessness, and unscrupulousness veiled by such polished externals. She had at first failed to comprehend many things which passed around her, but little by little she had learned to attach their

full meaning to them, and thus she arrived in the third year of her married life to a perception that the affections which Guilderoy did not give to her he took elsewhere. He did not, indeed, ever offend her by notorious or openly-displayed attachments; but she knew that the society of almost any other woman was more agreeable to him than her own. She saw that he was sought, flattered, admired, tempted, on all sides; and she saw that he did not resist, or try to resist, the temptation. Whether they were in London or Paris, in Italian cities or German watering places, or at their own country place, or the country places of their friends, she saw that any woman, seen for the first time and possessing beauty or charm enough to attract him, became for the time being infinitely more the mistress of his thoughts and feelings than she had ever had power to be.

'I wish you would endeavour to be amusing,' he said more than once to her. 'I assure you in these days Helen or Briseis herself would have no chance in the world if she were not amusing.'

'And were I amusing, I should have no power to amuse you,' she thought, though she did not say it. She was not amusing, because she was not amused. She was not amused because she was not happy. In happiness one enjoys trifles like a child, and the great world only seems to us a brilliant *décor de scène* set out on purpose to illustrate and illuminate our own romance, which is being played on its stage. But in the depression of repressed affections or disappointed illusions, the best of its pageantry leaves us depressed and displeased. The world thought Lady Guilderoy stupid, and when it was disturbed in this opinion by some unexpected allusion or some curt incisive phrase which showed in her both the habits of study and the powers of sarcasm, it disliked her still more than when it had believed that her lovely mouth could only drop monosyllables.

## CHAPTER XX.

THE only person, besides her father, who saw her wholly at her best, and quite as she was, was Aubrey. In great receptions, in large house parties, in all the crowd and movement of fashionable life, she was always glad to see him come to her side, and to feel the shield of his kindly friendship placed between her and the impertinences of fine ladies and the embarrassing homage of men, who, seeing that she was neglected,

made sure that she could be consoled. He did much for her that Guilderooy had never dreamed of doing, and would not have had patience to do if he had. He gave her many indications of all that she needed to know in the bewildering mazes of fashion and precedence. He got for her the good will of many persons of power and influence. He explained to her many things which astonished and troubled her, and he made her London receptions successful and distinguished. The world obeyed any hint from him eagerly, and all his social power, which was vast, he put out on behalf of his cousin's wife.

'Nothing would enrage and estrange Evelyn so greatly as to find her a social failure,' he thought very often, 'and yet he will not take the trouble to stretch out his little finger to prevent her being one.'

And what his cousin failed to do, Aubrey did.

'It is a little like Achilles spinning for me to interfere in these things,' he said with a smile, as he corrected her invitation list, explained to her questions of precedence, and told her why one duchess was a great sovereign revered by all society, and another duchess was a mere dowdy whose word nobody attended to or asked. All these things were trifles which were wholly insignificant in his sight, occupied as he was with the great cares of public life; but from his birth and position he was familiar with them; he knew their power to make or mar a woman's entry into the great world, and he had power to control all their mysterious influences; and all that it was necessary for her to know and avoid, she learned from him.

'Evelyn should do all this for you,' he said to her once. But his cousin did not, and never would have done, so Aubrey did it for him.

He knew that Guilderooy would never pardon a woman who bore his name if she did not attain eminence in society. Guilderooy imagined that he attached no value to social opinion, and weighed nothing in its scales. But he deceived himself in that as in many another estimate of his feelings, and unless the purest silver had possessed the hall mark he would never have rated it as silver.

'You are very kind to Gladys,' he said to his cousin once or twice, but he was never aware of all that he owed to Aubrey; and that if his wife received princes and princesses with a perfect manner, if she filled her houses with the best and only the best people, if she never made an error in the date of a title, or a mistake in the smaller intricacies of etiquette and precedence, it was due entirely to the man who sometimes, for the first time in his life, was late at a Cabinet Council, or tardy in speaking before a division, because he had been giving lessons in social policy to John Vernon's daughter.

'These are all very little things, both you and I consider,' said Aubrey to her. 'Yes, they are indeed the absurdest of trifles, and it is perhaps wonderful that a society on the brink of disintegration, as English society is, should still make so much of them. But it is just the knowledge of them, or the ignorance of them, which marks a woman of the world from a parvenue. Guilderoy wishes you to be a woman of the world, so omit nothing which is necessary to the education of the world. Besides, I confess that social etiquette has a certain value, if only in the maintenance of some standard for manners; I wish in some things that we had more of it; I wish it were not possible for an American adventuress to entertain the Prince of Wales, or for an English brewer to be hoisted into the House of Lords because he has made money by brewing, and been useful in elections. I know this latter possibility has been called the strength of England; but it has, on the contrary, been and is her very greatest weakness. For it has made social life a hotbed for aspiring toadyism, has made political life a manure heap for the propagation of mushroom nobility, and has enabled a minister to force measures on the country which the country disapproves, because he can bribe his supporters by the whispered promise of peerages. If new peers must be made, it would be better to call up all the Victoria Cross men to the Upper House than to make nobility ridiculous by conferring it on tradesmen. The Victoria Cross men would at least allow of some sort of analogy to the old reasons for knighthood.'

Gladys always listened and followed him with sincere interest when he spoke of these things. Her father had been used to converse with her at times on serious and public matters, and all the problems of government and history possessed much more interest for her than the fashionable frivolities of the hour.

'It will be time to think of politics twenty years hence,' said Guilderoy to her, but she thought of them already, and often went to the Speaker's gallery to hear Aubrey.

He spoke well; not with any great brilliancy of rhetoric, but with admirable lucidity and logic, great force of persuasion, great power of invective held in calm reserve, and that tone of perfect courtesy and scholarship which have been, until the last dozen years, the distinguishing glory of the House of Commons.

'Why do *you* never speak?' she asked once of Guilderoy, who answered impatiently:

'It is of no use to speak in the Lords. Besides, I have never spoken. If I were to rise now they would think I had gone mad. It is of no kind of use to enter political life unless one has been trained by having passed one's early years in the Commons. I could never have had that parliamentary educa-



tion. I succeeded my father when I was a child of five years old.'

'But you have great talents, they all say? My father says so, too!'

'I am not sure that I have any. The world and your father are too complimentary to me. But I have at all events the common sense not to spoil my whole life by efforts for which I am wholly unfitted, and which would be assuredly wholly unprofitable.'

'Aubrey's are not unprofitable?'

'I should not venture to say they were, but I am quite sure he is not such a blind optimist as to be satisfied with their results. Parliamentary government is the best machine that was ever constructed for grinding down superiority into mediocrity; that is why it is so immensely popular with the middle classes.'

'But if you believe in an oligarchy, you might at least support that if you were conspicuous in public life?'

'I never said I believed in it, my dear. All I am entirely convinced of is that the power of no man, whether Aubrey or another, will check permanently the gradual breaking up of England, which is being brought about by the inevitable decadence into which all nations fall.'

'I do not like to think it.'

'No one likes it; but our liking or our disliking will not alter the philosophy of history.'

'But do you not feel that our own lives lead to it? Do you not see that society is so foolish, so extravagant, so selfish, so crowded, that it must make those outside of it despise it even while they envy it? You have said yourself that there is neither elegance nor dignity in it, only an immense expenditure, and a feverish hurry. You have said yourself that instead of Mæcenas we have a nobility which sends its libraries and its picture galleries to the auction-room; which, rather than give up its racing and betting, its foreign baths and its London excesses, will see its old houses stripped, or its woods felled, or its collections bought by the Jews. I have heard you say that, or similar things, a thousand times.'

'Certainly, my dear; and does any Cuypp out of Ladysrcod, any Gainsborough out of this house, go to Christie's through me? I have never cut a stick of timber which it was not absolutely needful to cut for the health and the growth of the woods themselves. When I have been pressed for money, which has happened, though my income is large, I have never sold my family Holbeins nor my ancestral oaks. I have a very strong sense that *noblesse oblige*, though I have not, I admit, the virtues of my cousin Aubrey.'

He spoke with some irritation, and for the first time a vague sense of annoyance, at the opinion she had of Aubrey, stirred in him.

‘He and I,’ he continued, ‘have always been the industrious and the idle apprentices in the eyes of our families. He early chose Athene and I Venus. But though I grant he has the monopoly of the virtues, yet I have an ounce of conscience left, I assure you, and all that I have inherited will pass out of my hands as it came into them, intact to your children.’

She resigned the argument ; she could not press on him the fact that his life was utterly self-indulgent, however free it might be from the avarice or the indignity which allowed others to send their household goods to the market.

‘Who has filled your head with these fancies of utility ?’ he said, irritably. ‘Your father or my cousin ? What a singular thing it is that when nine hundred and ninety-nine women out of a thousand only ask to enjoy themselves, I should have married the one in a thousand who knows nothing of enjoyment !’

And he left her with some impatience. She could neither persuade nor allure him, because she possessed no influence upon him.

‘She will be all her life that most depressing thing, a conscientious woman !’ he thought with a smile and a sigh as he drove to his favourite club. ‘If she had married Aubrey she would have been a million times happier, and I——’

What would he have done ? Would he have remained at the feet of the only woman whom he had ever loved with any love approaching a strong passion ? He was not sure ; but what we might have done almost always looks to us so much fairer than what we have done.

He did full justice to his wife’s mind and character ; he even in theory admired them, but in actual fact he was only bored by them. She had not known how to interest and divert him ; she was transparently truthful, full of high ideals and high thoughts, and possessed with the terrible earnestness of youth ; but she only wearied him, and a woman far her inferior, morally and mentally, would have had far more power to move him when she wished if she had only had more pliability and more gaiety of temperament. He required to be amused as a petulant and spoilt child requires it. There were always countless women ready to do it ; he went to them and left Aubrey to bring blue-books and explain international law to his wife.

‘It is his *métier* !’ he said with some contempt. He did not perceive, because he did not study her enough to see it, that what prevented her from having such enjoyment of life as

would have been in accordance with her nature and her age was the sense, perpetually weighing on her, that he regretted his hasty marriage.

She felt that she was a burden on him; and though she never said it, its consciousness was ever present with her.

The existence of incessant change which she perpetually led gave her rather sadness and bewilderment than pleasure. The few months they remained in the London house, the few weeks spent at Ladysrood, the changes from Paris to Venice, to Cannes, to Aix, to Baden, according to the season of the year and the moods of fashion, gave her a sense of homelessness and restlessness which were not suited to her temperament. Life did not seem to her spent aright in this mere succession of display and distraction, this indolent and self-indulgent pursuit of the appetites and senses. She was afraid of seeming 'odd' in her world; for he told her that people were so soon considered so, and always detested as a consequence. She did her best to endeavour to seem amused at this perpetual carnival; but she could not bring herself to feel so. Her early education had left too indelible a stamp of simplicity and gravity upon her for her to easily adopt the tone of those around her. Sometimes Guilderoy saw, or thought he saw, a look of disdain for his pursuits and pastimes come upon her features, and it angered him extremely. He thought it a censure of himself.

'My sister's frown was quite enough in the family,' he said once petulantly.

'Did I frown?' said Gladys, very sorrowfully. 'I did not know it. Indeed I am very sorry.'

'You frown very often,' he said angrily. 'Perhaps you do not know it. It is an ugly habit, and makes people think you a prude.'

'I see a great deal in society that I do not like,' she said, a little coldly.

'And pray, my dear, did it never occur to you that neither age nor experience have as yet qualified you to act as duenna to a naughty world?'

She coloured at the ridicule in his accent.

'About some things I am sure I am right,' she said in a low tone, which sounded to him like obstinacy. 'One wants no duenna to know that there are some things which are—which offend one—one feels them.'

'You feel them because your heart is always behind your beehives and sweetbriar at Christslea, and you think everyone should talk like your father, with equal parts of St. Augustine and Horace. You are a country mouse at heart, and are always sighing for the hayricks. How I do wish you were not! It makes the women detest you and laugh at you; and it does not suit

your style at all. You look a great lady, not a Phyllis or Amaryllis.'

'They may laugh if they please,' she said, with the look on her face with which she had once said that the Cherriton lads might burn the hut down if they pleased.

'But that is just what they must not do,' said Guilderoy, considerably irritated. 'Nothing offends or annoys me more; nothing is so odious as the ridicule by women of a woman. She never recovers it. It is much less injurious to her to be calumniated than to be laughed at. The greatest beauty cannot stand it.'

'It is wholly indifferent to me!'

'But it is not to me,' said Guilderoy. '*Le ridicule tue*. It kills grace, it kills charm, it kills popularity. It would afflict me immeasurably if for want of a little flexibility you were considered a precisian in the world. It is Hilda's style, I am aware, but it is a most uncomfortable style, most depressing in its effect upon others, and not at all the style of our day.'

'*Une société gangrenée!* Oh, we know all that; it has been said admirably by Balzac, and more or less since by all his imitators,' continued Guilderoy impatiently. 'It is really not necessary, my love, that you should either preach or philosophise about it. There are always numbers of writers and wits who make their livelihood by repeating all that kind of thing as well as it can be said; and I am myself convinced that no amount of condemnation will ever alter matters by a hand's breadth—not even condemnation so weighty and so terrible as yours!'

She coloured, mortified by the words and by their tone. She felt that in his eyes she was always the same country child who had first opened the little wicket for him under the boughs at Christlea. She had grown a century older in her own feelings; she was greatly changed in the eyes of all others; but in his sight she was always the same young and unworldly rustic, who had known no society beyond that of the fisherfolk on the shore and the wild creatures of the moorlands and orchards.

He had no patience to discuss her opinions; he could not see why she should have any. This disdainful relegation of her to an utterly inferior place in intelligence, in its strong contrast with the reverential sympathy of Aubrey, gave her a passionate sense of offence, which was too deep to be easily expressed.

'He thinks me a fool,' she felt bitterly; and she knew that she was not one, that she could have met him on equal ground if he had deigned to so encounter her.

She was silent.

'English society,' he continued, 'has undergone the most radical revolution in its tone and temper as well as in its politics; it has put seven-leagued boots on in the ways of demoralisation

as well as democracy. It is much more than fast, it is constantly outrageous. We have always been a very profligate nation, though we have professed great chastity; and in this generation the impudent people are uppermost, and they have moulded a society to their liking, and everyone who is not of it is nowhere.'

'Do you desire that I should be of it?'

'Of course not, my dear child. Why will you suggest absurdities? You do not wait to hear my conclusion. I was about to say that modern society, being no longer high-bred, but only "smart," no longer distinguished, but only rich, as immoral as it can possibly be, and having even ceased to be able to tell a gentlewoman from a *cabotine* when it sees one, good manners are altogether thrown away upon it, and it only laughs at them.'

'Its laughter must be less degrading than its praise!'

'That is the sort of thing which you are always saying and for which they detest you. I am not estimating its praise. I am wholly indifferent to it. But I assure you that your scornful dignity and your delicate susceptibilities are as out of place in it as the silver ewer that the royal fugitives carried with them on the road to Varennes.'

'Silver vessels seemed natural to them, I suppose.'

'Yes; and so the silver of seriousness and high-breeding are natural to you. But it is the people with the pitchforks and the false assignats that are now blocking the roads of society everywhere, and though you cannot help being royal, you may as well smile when you can.'

He could not say to her what he really wished to convey, that her lack of animation and interest made women laugh at her, and laugh at him because they believed her jealous of his attentions to them; and the unconscious disapprobation often spoken in her eyes of the society which most amused him was a constant theme of raillery against him with his female friends.

Material sorrows everyone can understand, though even these everyone does not stay to pity; but the sorrows of the spirit, when combined with material prosperity, hardly anyone has patience to contemplate. Cold, hunger, and ill-health, all these wants and pains physical, are easily comprehended even by the unsympathetic; but the cold of the soul which is solitary, the hunger of the heart which vaguely misses and vaguely desires what it has never yet found, the ill-health of the spirit which is weary and yet restless, which sits at the banquets of the world without appetite, and turns away from all which delights others, cloyed and yet empty, this no one will ever pity; the multitude only calls it in a man cynicism, and in a woman ennui. And yet how far it is from being either one or the other!

She was too young to know the charm of toleration, the wisdom of indifference, the force of an influence which is never urged but merely suggested. Her character had been constructed by her father's teachings on a few broad lines; the lines on which were built the characters of a simpler, graver, calmer day than ours, when women stayed at home whether in palace or in cabin. It had strength, truth, candour, honour, purity; but like many such characters, it lacked pliancy, sympathy, and comprehensiveness. It adhered to its own few firm rules, and did not allow for, because it did not, in any measure, perceive, the caprices, the necessities, and the weaknesses of others.

There is a fatal law which philosophers might possibly trace out to some law of compensation, which usually makes the woman of perfect purity and candour incapable of that charm of quickly comprehending and infinitely pardoning which makes a woman most sweet and most beloved.

## CHAPTER XXI.

AUBREY's sister, the Duchess of Longleat, was one of those who make *la pluie et le beau temps* in the great world for those she disapproved or favoured. She had conceived at first a violent dislike to Gladys because 'no one knew her'—darkest of all social crimes! But Aubrey took infinite pains to reconcile her, and to secure her kindness and support to Guilderoy's wife.

'Why should you care whether she is admired or detested?' his sister asked him once; and he replied:

'I care because I pity her infinitely; she is married to a man who will never pardon her if she fails to succeed in his world, and who yet will never take the trouble to point out to her the way to succeed.'

'It is a dangerous occupation to do it for him,' said his sister. 'She is extremely handsome.'

'Not dangerous to me,' said Aubrey with a rather sad smile. 'You know I am *bien trempé*.'

'To Evelyn to have his wife a mere country nonentity,' he continued, 'a woman who makes blunders and is quoted in ridicule because she sends in the wrong people together, would be infinitely more intolerable than to have her a Medea or a Lady Macbeth. She knows nothing of social matters. How should she? She is a child, and she has always lived in a cottage with a recluse. But some one must teach them to her.'

Hilda Sunbury ought, but she will not; virtuous woman though she is, she would be delighted at everything which would separate her brother from his wife. Evelyn will not because he is too indolent, and he has moreover no patience with people to whom these things are not a second nature. There only remains yourself or myself. We must undertake her training in these things.'

'I really do not see why,' said the Duchess. 'Evelyn is an unconscionable egotist. He has always been so; he always will be. We are not bound to remedy the omissions of his selfishness.'

But she adored her brother, and to please him threw over the new-comer the mighty ægis of her approbation and protection. The world always followed her Grace of Longleat like sheep.

'The Duchess of Longleat thinks her perfect,' was a phrase with which those who wished ill to Gladys were easily silenced. Against the opinion of that greatest of great ladies there was no appeal.

Guilderoy meanwhile went on his own way, not taking any notice of the means by which his wife's social success was secured. He was often absent in Paris, in Italy, at German baths, or in Austrian country houses, and his wife was quickly becoming not of much more serious import to him than the chests of old Stuart and Tudor plate locked up at Ladysrood. He prized the plate certainly, and would have been indignant and humiliated if thieves had broken in and stolen it. But it was scarcely ever in his thoughts. He trusted its safe keeping to that good fortune which had attended him from his birth.

He had, by degrees, glided back into his old habits, his old amusements, his old attentions to women; and he never looked intently or fondly enough at her to become aware of a certain look which was in her eyes when they followed him which might have told him that she was neither a child nor a saint, neither impassive nor forgiving. He only thought her of a cold temperament, and was glad.

She vaguely yet painfully felt that she had been deceived by the grave and tender sentiments which he had expressed so constantly before marriage with her, and which were now never heard of from him. He seemed utterly to have forgotten all the poetic and romantic views with which he had captivated her childish imagination; and she thought that they had been entirely assumed to attract her. She did him wrong. He had been quite sincere in his moods of serious and ardent fancy when he had been first under the charm of Christlea. He had affected nothing; he had been actually, for the time being, the imaginative and serious lover which he had seemed to be. He

was a man wholly surrendered to the influence of the moment, and taking all his colour from it.

Very soon after his union with her, the habitual influences of his life had begun to reassume their force over him ; the poetry and earnestness which had never been more than momentary with him had ceded place in turn to the instincts and modes of thought more common to him. He had never been insincere, although he appeared so to her. He had been merely following the whims and emotions of a season ; and when she ceased to have any power over him, the kind of feelings which she had temporarily aroused faded with the fading of her charm. His sister had been wholly correct in saying that his fancy for his wife had only been in feeling an *amourette* like many another, and it had no more enduring weight with him. But in all this he was not false, although he seemed to her to be so. He followed his own varying moods, and if she became of but slight account in his existence, it was because he honestly forgot that she ought to be of any.

But all these complications and vacillations of character were too intricate for her to follow ; and she only felt a continually growing sense that she had been intentionally deceived by him when he had wooed her with the graceful and chivalrous kind of homage which had won her young heart under the red autumn leaves of the Christslea orchards. The world forever claimed him ; and he went to its claims willingly.

He could not live without stimulant, distraction, movement, excitement ; they were all drugs indispensable to his existence ; and in the funes of them such an idyl as had smiled at him for a moment amongst the autumn flowers of Christslea had no chance to retain its spell. He had been quite sincere in it ; as sincere as when he had assured her father that he sighed for the nude and childlike soul of a virgin love. He had not consciously played a part ; because he had believed that the part was his own whilst he had played it. But this was too subtle for her comprehension ; she only saw that the man who had wooed her did not exist in the man who had wedded her.

In him, as in many another man of intelligence and imagination, the mingled fever and conventionality of modern life had made both imagination and intelligence mere occasional factors in his thoughts and character ; frittered away and hurried away by the ever-pressing crowd of baser instincts and more material interests and pleasures.

In all the wishes and fancies for a more poetic existence, and for more innocent affections, which he had expressed to her, and to her father, in the weeks preceding his marriage, he had been his own dupe ; and had deluded himself with a mirage



of his own creating. The mirage had faded ; but the obligations he had taken on himself when under the charm of it remained behind it.

Now and then, indeed, he felt with a pang that he did not keep his promise to John Vernon in either the spirit or the letter. ‘*Et puer est, et nudus Amor,*’ he had said when sitting under the porch at Christ’slea ; but the divine nudity of the innocent soul had soon seemed to him of little charm, and he had wished it draped and veiled with those arts which heighten what they hide. He knew, in his own consciousness, that every word which Vernon had predicted had been verified. He had sought those who threw the sulphur on the fading or on the rising flame. Often he sought them in spheres far removed from the knowledge or observation of his wife. But at times the women who beguiled him were amidst those of her own world.

There was a new star risen over London society in the third year of his marriage. It was a lady familiarly called by all her male friends Olive Shiffton : a very pretty woman, with the undulating form and the voluptuous grace of an odalisque, combined with an impudence which was almost heroic, and a success only possible in the senility and sensuality of society at the close of this century. Mrs. Shiffton had come no one very well knew whence. Her husband had a large Australian fortune, and she herself was vaguely said to be ‘a lawyer’s daughter,’ which, as Lady Sunbury observed, was satisfactory, no doubt, but vague, comprising as it did everything whatever from the Lord Chancellor down to the lowest attorney of Smoke Street. Be she what she would, she was lovely to look at, had caught the eye and amused the ennui of an exalted personage, and had, by audacity, cringing, and cleverness, placed herself in the highest rank of society. Some great ladies still did not know her, indeed, but they were the exception. Mrs. Percy Shiffton was really seen ‘everywhere.’

She laid siege to Guilderoy, and succeeded in beguiling him. She amused him infinitely, quite as much by what she was not as by what she was. Her constant endeavour to persuade herself and everybody that she had been born in the purples was a perpetual comedy to him ; whilst the great rarity of her peculiar loveliness, which was that of a *Créole* rather than of an English-woman, had a potent seduction for his senses.

‘Do not even think of that odious woman ; I do not even know her,’ said the Duchess of Longleat to Gladys ; but Gladys could not but see the power possessed and exercised by this person, whom she met at every turn and in every house except at that of Her Grace of Longleat, at Balfrons, and at Illington. The very exclusion of the lady from the houses of his relatives

served to suggest to her the terms of intimacy existing between Guilderoy and Olive Shiffton.

'It is only his way ; he is always flirting like that ; it means nothing,' whispered the Duchess to her once at a great ball at Grosvenor House, where Guilderoy, half amused, half bored, was sitting out four dances under the shadow of tropical plants by the side of Olive Shiffton.

'Why do you not flirt too, you goose? That would bring him to his senses,' thought the Duchess. But she had too much of the good nature of the Balfrons blood to make the suggestion, and she had great respect for the self-control with which a woman so young as Gladys succeeded in restraining all evidence of suspicion or indignation.

'It is not Olive Shiffton that she need care about,' said Lady Sunbury to her. 'He will play with her a season—half a season—nothing more. There are greater dangers than that, if she only could understand them.'

'What do you mean?' asked the Duchess.

'I mean that all these caprices do not really matter. What does matter is the only woman he has ever really loved, or, to my belief, will ever really love.'

'Beatrice Soria?' asked the Duchess. 'But I thought that was all broken off long ago?'

'My dear Ermyntrude,' replied Lady Sunbury, 'there are plants which only grow the stronger for being broken off ; any gardener will tell you that. He was in Italy this spring, and you know Soria is dead.'

'Certainly he was in Italy, and certainly Soria is dead ; but it does not follow—'

'How can you say so? Oh ! if there were nothing more truly dangerous than the Olive Shifftons of society we should not all suffer as we do.'

'Well, do not suggest it to Gladys. Here, if anywhere, ignorance is bliss.'

'I am not a mischief-maker,' replied Lady Sunbury with hauteur and dignity.

'I am afraid you are, sometimes,' thought Ermyntrude Longleat ; and she communicated her apprehensions to her brother.

'I do not think there is any danger from the Duchess Soria,' he answered. 'She is a very proud woman. Proud women cannot be discarded one day and freshly won the next.'

'Oh, my dear, if she be still in love with him !' said his sister, who did not see much security in this barrier.

Meantime Gladys was only very dimly aware of the causes for jealousy which were given her. She did not understand enough of the world or of the persons in it to be conscious of how much she might have to resent.

She felt that her husband cared but little about her ; she was sensible that his life contained numerous interests, friendships, and amusements in which she had no part, and of which she had scarcely any knowledge ; but the complete innocence of her childhood hung too long about her like a golden mist not to be as yet a veil which blinded her to much. She had no comprehension of men's natures. Her father had tried to suggest their faults and follies to her, but her mind had not embraced the extent of his meaning. On'y very slowly, little by little, as months succeeded months, did she begin to comprehend the vast difference between what was and what seemed to be in the world in which she found herself, and realised the vast extent to which unacknowledged affections and influences have in it a greater potency than those which are visible and avowed.

In her ignorance she had fancied that, because she was his wife, Guilderoy would for ever prefer her to all others ; she learned that it was rather almost all others whom he preferred to herself. He was indeed, never unkind to her, or otherwise than courteous. The greatest want of kindness which he ever showed was in a lack of attention to what she said, a restrained but yet perceptible weariness whenever she was alone with him. He was liberal even to extravagance in all he gave her ; he was scrupulously punctilious in politeness to her before his household or his friends, and he was seldom ruffled by the utterance even of an impatient sentence to her ear. But, all the same, she felt that she was very little, perhaps nothing, to him ; and when she recalled the adoration of the first few weeks of their union she felt a cold like ice close in about her heart ; for she knew all that she missed, all that she had lost.

No doubt there were many women of her age who would have been made quite sufficiently happy by the material powers and pleasures which he had given her. But she was not. Her pride was incessantly wounded and her affections were incessantly starved ; and she was sore of heart amidst the profusion, the dazzling changes, the movement and the constant crowds, of her new existence.

She had not very much time left to her to think ; but her thoughts were often bitter and troubled when her lips were speaking those conventional phrases in which she had learned to take refuge. The preoccupation and depression which were so often on her took from the charm of her personal loveliness, because they robbed it of light and animation. The glad spontaneous smile with which she had welcomed the name of Sir Roger de Coverley, or recognised the bay of Christleas in David Cox's drawing, was never seen upon her features now.

' You have really marvellously acquired all the *morgue* of an English great lady,' he said to her once. ' I never imagined you

would be able to assume so easily the impassiveness and unpleasantness which my sister and many like her of the old school think so necessary to the high breeding of a woman of fashion!’

He did not perceive that what were dead in her were the vivacity, the *insouciance*, and the abandonment of youth.

‘That is cruelly unkind ; I do all that I can to be whatever you wish,’ she answered him with tears brimming in her eyes.

He rose, restless and angry and unreasonable.

‘For heaven’s sake, my dear, do not give way to hysteria like that,’ he said with much unconscious exaggeration. ‘I thought you too proud and high-spirited to burst out crying at every word which does not flatter you.’

‘I do not want flattery,’ she said indignantly. ‘I want only justice.’

‘Anything which is not flattery seems injustice to a woman,’ he said irritably. ‘One can never hint a fault to them but what they think we are brutal and ungenerous. All that I ask of you is to enjoy your life—at least, to look as if you did. It is no immense demand, assuredly. You have everything which attracts and pleases other women, and yet nothing whatever seems to attract or please you. I did not make the world, and I cannot alter it. You must learn to take it as it is. We all have to do so, or become intolerable to ourselves and others.’

‘There is only one thing I want,’ she said in a voice so low that he scarcely heard it.

‘What is that ?’ he said with some impatience. She looked at him, and could not bring herself to answer.

‘Nothing you can give me,’ she said with a return of that coldness which he at once admired and detested in her.

‘What some one else can give then ?’ he asked with a sudden surprise and displeasure.

‘No.’

‘Cannot you speak, my dear, without enigmas or monosyllables ? If it be anything in reason you shall have it.’

She looked at him wistfully. She longed to say to him all that she felt, to open her heart to him in all its longing and pain, but the sensitiveness and pride of her temper kept the words of confession and entreaty from her lips. She was afraid of his contemptuous and slighting reception of her expressions of affection, and she had the overwhelming consciousness that she was too indifferent to him for him ever to take the trouble to penetrate or analyse her feelings for him.

‘I wish I could please you,’ she said, instead of the words which had been on her lips ; and these seemed to him stiff and commonplace, and left him cold.

‘You please me in much,’ he said. ‘I am very proud of you in much. But I would willingly see you gayer of temper and

more easily interested. It is so much, my dear, for a woman to be amiable ! And nothing is so unamiable as the tendency you display to brood over your own wrongs and *poser* to yourself as superior to the rest of the world. Pray do not let this inclination to tearful scenes grow upon you. Nothing is so distressing to any man ; and I, more even than most men, abhor everything approaching to a scene. Remember that, dear, and try to be happy. If I have not made you so it is my misfortune, not my fault.'

He believed what he said.

'It will be terrible,' he thought when he was alone, 'if she become *la femme incomprise*. There is nothing on earth so distressing, so unconsolable, so absolutely unreasonable upon earth. At present she is young, and really lovely, and it does not matter much ; but, years hence, it will be unbearable, and how is one to check it ? It is always a malady which grows. Good heavens ! why were women made like that—always analysing your feelings and their own, always teasing you to tell them that what is dying is not dead ; always pulling up love by its roots if they think its blossom looks sickly, always killing by over-culture the very thing they most wish should live eternally ? I know she is good. I think her lovely. I was very fond of her for a while ; I am not now ; I cannot help that. But it is possible that I might be so again if she did not weary me. Cannot she understand that ? No ; they never understand it. They can never comprehend that one's soul revolves like the earth, and has its summer and winter solstice. With them it must be all summer at canicular heat, and if they cannot have the sunshine of summer, they will at least have its storms.'

And he went out of his house with a sense of extreme irritation.

'I have always been kind to her,' he would have said, if anyone had reproached him ; and he was indeed wholly unaware that anything of kindness was lacking in him. He had had a nervous dread of her displaying any attachment to him in the world, and he was relieved to find that she was so undemonstrative and so reasonable. She suffered with all the terrible anxiety of instinctive jealousy whenever she saw his attentions to other women, and when she realised how easy it was for them to enchain and charm him, and how impossible for her. But her fears took no definite shape ; even her sense of pain came rather from the idea of her own insufficiency to him than of his inconstancy to her.

## CHAPTER XXII.

ONE day, Gladys, returning unexpectedly from a drive, and going upstairs to her own rooms without summoning any servant, came suddenly on her head waiting woman, who was standing before her opened jewel-safe. It was an iron safe enclosed in an inlaid lac box of great beauty, and standing on a metal tripod, of which the feet were fastened to the floor by screws. The key was kept by herself on her watch-chain.

The woman did not hear her approach, and was pausing in hesitation before the first jewel-tray; her hesitation ended in selecting rapidly two or three rings, which she slipped into the bosom of her dress. She was tempted, but afraid, to take the larger objects. She was a Scotchwoman, a widow, and very religious, high in esteem with, and long trusted by, great families; she had been in the service of Gladys since her marriage, when she had been hired for her by Lady Sunbury.

Her mistress now went up to her without a sound and took the key out of her hand.

'Put back those rings you have stolen,' she said in a calm voice. The woman turned red and white, trembled, stammered, and protested.

'Denial is of no use,' said Gladys. 'You have opened the safe with a false key, for I have its own key on my chain, as you know. Put back the rings. You took three.'

The maid, trembling in every limb, brought them from their hiding-place and restored them to their cases.

'You will not ruin me, my lady?' she said piteously. 'My character is all that I have in the world to live by!'

'Have you taken anything before?'

'Not much,' she muttered. 'I never touched the safe before, so help me God! But you are very careless with your money, my lady, and it is a cruel temptation to put in the sight of poor folks.'

Gladys looked at her in disgust.

'And I gave you fifty pounds last month to send your children to the sea!' she said slowly. 'And I have trusted you. I have trusted you entirely ever since I took you into my service. Are you not ashamed to have repaid me thus?'

'You trust everybody, my lady,' said the woman with ill-concealed scorn. 'And there are those higher than I, and nearer to you than I, as repays you worse.'

The face of Gladys flushed hotly.

‘Leave me this moment,’ she said; ‘I will not arrest you for the sake of your children. Perhaps I do wrong to let a thief go unmarked into the world. But I hope that you will remember the danger you have escaped, and be honest to your employers in the future.’

The woman made her a low curtsy, murmured a hypocritical blessing on her, and tried to kiss her hand. But Gladys motioned her away.

‘Leave the house in ten minutes, or I will not answer for my longer clemency.’

The maid curtsied a second time, and withdrew in silence.

‘You young fool!’ she thought, ‘you have never looked if your other jewels are safe, and you little guess the nest-egg I have laid up from your carelessness every month since I have been in your service. Trusted me! Aye, you trust everybody, you born simpleton, and you go through the muck of the world as if it were a meadow of daisies!’

When Gladys told Guilderoy of the incident he was amused.

‘I am glad it is that sanctimonious Presbyterian, whom Hilda thought such a pearl,’ he answered. ‘My dear child, you may be quite sure that you are robbed right and left by all your people. We always are. The woes of employers should be sung by another Tom Hood. The whole world is just now on its knees in adoration before the poorer classes; all the cardinal virtues are taken for granted in them, and it is only property of any kind which is the sinner. But I fancy, if the truth were known, the scales are more evenly weighted than that, and that the continuous robbery to which property is subjected by those possessors of all the virtues who yawn in our halls, and gorge themselves on our food, would pretty well make the balance even between us. Do not think more about it. Take a Frenchwoman; you will not find her reading the Bible when you come home from a ball, but she will be much more agreeable to you, and infinitely more honest.’

But to Gladys the matter was not so light.

To a nature which is very faithful, honest, and trustful, any deception seems the most appalling of crimes; and all ingratitude seems to enter the very flesh like a thorn.

Soon after the discovery of the theft a newspaper was sent to her with a broad mark placed against one of its paragraphs. She supposed it referred to some critique or essay of her father’s; his scholarly work for the great reviews was always full of interest to her even when she did not understand the subject of it. But at the first line she now read a burning colour mounted over her face and throat; she saw that the paragraph was far from the harmless thing she thought, and that the

news-sheet was one of those curses of modern society which live on supplying it with anonymous calumnies.

The marked lines, carefully worded to escape the laws of libel, but plain as the alphabet to the initiated, spoke jestingly of the tender relations existing between one of the largest land-owners and most influential peers of the south-western counties and an olive branch brought from the antipodes; suggested with a sneer that the olive in this case would not mean peace, and recommended the noble Lothario to read the marriage service over once a week. In its studied innuendo and its cowardly malignity the insinuated charge was a masterpiece of its own venomous and iniquitous order. More subtle than Iago, more treacherous than Iscariot, more devilish than Satan's self, these privileged and unpunished carrion-eaters of the press bear ruin and shame and indignity into innocent hearts and happy homes, themselves safe and secure in their masked crime because the very loftiness of the place of those whom they attack forbids them to descend into the mud of public tribunals.

She read it with horror, and flung it from her as she would have cast off a viper.

She had been too much surrounded by the hints and jests and smiles of the world not to comprehend to what and to whom the slander pointed. But it was the first time that the full meaning of her husband's attentions to women grew plain to her.

She paced to and fro her room in a paroxysm of disgust and horror. She had the sensation of falling headlong down from some giddy height. All the force, the passion, and the scorn which slept under her outward seriousness and serenity leaped up in her. She seized the paper from the corner whither she had flung it, and tore it with quivering hands into a thousand pieces.

At that moment Aubrey entered. One glance at her face told him that she was suffering from some great shock.

'My dear child, what can possibly have happened?' he asked her in great concern.

It was four o'clock; he was going down to the House, and had come in for a moment on his way to bring her some political news.

She told him in a few broken and ashamed words what she had read.

'It is not true? It cannot be true?' she asked him, gazing with heart-breaking entreaty into his face.

'Of course it is not true, my dear,' he answered, avoiding her gaze; and he said in his soul, 'God forgive me if I tell her what is a falsehood!—after all it may not be true.'

'You should not read those papers,' he added. 'The men



who fatten and grow rich on them should be flogged at the cart's tail from Kensington to Shoreditch. When I think that they drink burgundy, and drive in broughams, while we send other men who snatch a watch or a purse to the treadmill, I feel that our whole hollow system of society and civilisation is so accursed that it will be all too good a fate for us if our whole city perishes by the *Clan-na-gael*.'

'But is it true?' she repeated, in all a woman's seclusive narrowing of thought of her own sufferings and passions. 'You know—you know—he *does* admire her.'

'I do not believe he admires her. He plays with her. She amuses idle moments for him in society, that is all,' replied Aubrey with some embarrassment. 'My dearest child, do not distress yourself. An Olive Shiffton is not worth one tear of yours.'

'But I have seen——' The words were broken in their utterance by a sob in her throat.

Aubrey sighed heavily; he felt all the restless pain of a man before the sorrow of a woman to whom he is sincerely attached, and whom it is utterly out of his power to console.

'You have seen him flirting with her. All that means nothing. You must not put any false construction on it. She is a pretty woman and an audacious; but she has neither the good breeding nor the good taste which could ever make her really charming to a man who has both. How can you read these foolish and villainous news-sheets?'

'This one was sent to me marked. I thought it was something about some essay of my father's.'

'Very likely she sent it herself,' said Aubrey. But there he wronged her; it was the discharged maid who had sent it. 'She is an adventuress, nothing better, though London society has taken her to its bosom. My dear Gladys, do not descend to any thought of her. It is beneath you.'

'That is easily said!' she murmured, with a faint smile.

'And difficult to feel. That I quite understand. But not impossible, I think, is it? Not to a proud and loyal nature? Not to your father's daughter?'

She was silent. He was infinitely grieved for her. He felt an intensity of indignation on her behalf which he could not express lest he should lend weight to her suspicions and strength to her anger. His affection for her was full of compassion, and he felt much what he would have felt if he had seen a child that he was fond of struck a blow on its tender flesh.

He endeavoured to make her apprehensions and her wrongs seem lighter than he knew that they had every right to be, because he was convinced that any evidence of her indignation given to his cousin would only cause dissension and disunion,

and lead to a scene which would very likely end in final rupture.

‘You have never been intimate with this person?’ he asked.

‘Never. I bow to her; and he told me to send her a card for our great ball; that was all.’

‘Then you will have no trial of intercourse with her. I am sure that he will not ask you to invite her to Ladysrood. He knows what my sister’s and his sister’s opinions of her are. Next season you may be sure he will have forgotten she exists. You will say nothing of this to him?’

‘No?’

Her accent was interrogative, doubtful, reproachful.

‘No,’ said Aubrey. ‘No; certainly not if you are wise, my dear. He is not a man to be patient under interrogation or reproach. If you appeared to believe such a story you would possibly excite, you would inevitably irritate him. He will see and know nothing of it. He never reads newspapers by any hazard, and you may be sure that no one will venture to speak of this to him.’

‘But something should be done? Is such an offence as that to pass? Am I to be humiliated in such a way, and no one of all my friends revenge it?’

‘Leave the matter to me,’ said Aubrey. ‘You are a part of my family. All that ought to be done shall be done. But for your own sake, my dear, do not open this subject with Guilderoy.’

She was silent still.

All the burning pain of the first deadly knowledge of her life was like fire in her veins. To her, as to every woman who loves and is wronged, the hardest task of all was to be meek and to endure with patience.

‘You believe that I am your friend?’ said Aubrey, gravely, as he took her hands in his own. She raised her eyes to his heavy with tears.

‘Oh, yes,’ she said, with deep emotion. ‘You are the only friend I have, except my father.’

Aubrey was deeply touched, but he restrained all that he felt.

‘Do not say that, dear; you have many who care for you. My sister cares very warmly; and were she here she would say the same to you as I. Do not be the first to break your peace with Evelyn; if you were to speak of this bitterly—and you could not speak of it calmly—it would be a firebrand which would set in a blaze the whole of your relations with him, present and future.’

She did not answer. She could not say even to Aubrey what she felt in her heart, that she was absolutely nothing to her husband, and that the violence of anger from him would

have seemed almost more easily endurable than the sense that he only gave her outward courtesies and that sort of indifferent regard which he felt for her because she was physically beautiful, and so did him honour in the world.

'You will promise me?' said Aubrey. 'I have not a moment to lose. I must be at the House in ten minutes' time; tell me before I go that you will follow my counsels. Believe me they are such as Vernon himself would give you were he here.'

'I will try,' she answered.

'That is not enough. You must say, "I will." You will keep your promise once given, I know.'

She hesitated a moment; then she said in a low voice:

'You can judge best, I daresay. I will not speak of it.'

'That is right, and brave, and wise. One day you will thank me,' said Aubrey; he kissed her forehead gravely with his accustomed salute and left her.

It had cost him much to keep to her a tone so calm and in semblance almost unsympathetic. He felt that if he had met Guilderoy upon the staircase of the house it would have been a hard struggle not to have insulted him in her behalf. But he knew that the advice which he had given her was sound. She would have to learn to bear such trials as these in silence. Probably much heavier ones would await her in the future.

'Poor child!' he thought sadly. His heart was heavy as he walked towards Westminster. His thoughts went back to the days of his early and secret marriage; the fatal mistake of his boyhood, which had been confessed to his father but to no other creature in the world. He recalled the immense devotion, the exaggerated constancy, which he had given in the ardour and loyalty of youth to one whose worthlessness he had learned too late. How strange, how contradictory, how cruel, he thought, the caprices and the awards of fate! He who in the loneliness of rank and power would have deemed a great, a disinterested, and a faithful love the dearest of earth's treasures, had been betrayed where he had given heart and soul and honour; and his cousin, to whom to give constancy was impossible and to receive it was wearisome, had the whole life of this beautiful child centered in him, and was moved by it rather to impatience and annoyance than to any other emotion!

'He will want some day what he throws away now,' thought Aubrey as he walked to his place in the Chamber.

And the next moment he knew that this reflection was romantically false; that it was beyond all other things unlikely that Guilderoy would ever be met by any such chastisement in kind; and that in the treasure-house of love it is frequently those who give the least who most receive.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

'I HAVE not a doubt the Shiffton woman had it put in herself to compromise him. It is just the sort of thing she would do,' said the Duchess of Longleat, when he spoke of the matter to her.

'He has no right to place himself in a position to be compromised,' said Aubrey.

'The best advice to her,' said the Duchess, 'would be to flirt outrageously; to compromise herself, to awaken him and affright him. But one hesitates to tell her that; it is always playing with edged tools.'

'And I do not think she would do it if you did tell her. The swan cannot affect the parade of the peacock. She is not of that type.'

'No, she will not flirt,' said the Duchess. 'But she may do worse. If she be thus chilled and offended, she may throw herself into some flood of real passion, half out of vengeance, and half out of the need of love. That is usually the way with women who are reserved in manner but have warm hearts.'

'There is no such passion in our day.'

'Oh, my dear, that is a mere phrase. There is as much, or as little, as there ever was probably. Your favourite Greeks and Latins were as fond of butterfly loves as our society is, if I remember aright the verses that you used to translate to me at Balfrons when we were children.'

'Yes, but theirs *were* loves, whilst they lasted; in most of the "affairs" of our days what is there except vanity, advertisement, often avarice, sometimes jealousy, at best sensual impulses? Of passion nothing, or almost nothing.'

'I think she would be capable of more.'

'I think so too; she is capable of more; but it is thrown away on a man who does not even perceive it.'

'She will not always give everything for nothing.'

'Probably; and that makes her danger. If she ever love anyone else, she will not be content with one of the passing *liaisons* of which we see so much; she will believe herself lost, as women believed in old days, and will end her life wretchedly in ceaseless remorse.'

'It is Guilderoy who should have the remorse.'

Aubrey smiled bitterly.

'My dear! Do you think he could ever be stirred to such an emotion, even if he stood by her dead body? He would say

that she had always been unreasonable, and unsympathetic. Every woman seems to him unsympathetic, and unreasonable, who does not at once understand his desertion of her.'

He felt the greatest anger against his cousin; he had always been impatient of his many changes and his countless passions, and he had blamed him for wasting all his years and his intelligence in the mere pursuit of women who only wearied him as soon as they were won. But now his anger against him took a more personal shape. He felt intolerant of his neglect of his duties and his indifference to all that was noblest and worthiest of culture in the nature of Gladys.

He preserved silence towards him, because his intimate experience of the world told him that interference has almost always unhappy issues, and he saw no way in which it would be possible for him to convey to Guilderoy his own opinions without producing such a quarrel as must inevitably put an end to all intimacy between them. Besides, what effect could remonstrance of any kind have upon a temperament like his cousin's?

If he did not care for his wife, what condemnation or persuasion could ever induce him to do so? Feelings are not to be called into existence by censure or argument. They are wind-sown flowers, and must spring how and where they will.

Gladys kept her word.

She never mentioned the matter to Guilderoy, and she never flinched or even betrayed anger when she met Olive Shiffton in society, as she constantly did. Her manner grew a little colder, a little graver, to all the world than it had been before; and all the women, and many a man, said what a pity it was that she was so silent, and looked so uninterested, that none could, in common parlance, 'get on' with her; but that was all. She went out into the world with her pain hidden under conventional courtesies with quite as much courage as the Spartan boy who hid the growling cub beneath his cloak.

Was it true? That wonder, that doubt, haunted her every hour. It occupied her every thought. It almost made her forget her little dead boys lying in their tiny coffins on beds of dead white roses in the churchyard of Ladysrood. Was it true? Was it?

At times horrible coarse temptations assailed her, things that she had read of or heard of, means by which women in jealous pain learned the truth through interrogated servants or bribed messengers. But such temptations only passed through her mind for moments, as hot winds sweep over fair fields. Her loyalty and her pride alike rejected their tempting. Yet the impression grew more strongly upon her that it was true. There was, or she fancied there was, an insolence of triumph in the black languid eyes of Olive Shiffton whenever they met hers

across a crowded room, which to her tortured fancy confirmation writ. And she had not even the solace of Aubrey's presence, for ten days after the day on which she had received the journal he had been compelled to go to Balmoral as the minister in attendance on the Queen.

What was the use of a great love, she thought wearily, if he to whom it was given neither heeded nor wanted it?

It was certainly beautiful in theory for her father to bid her make hers so great that her husband could find no other equal to it; but if its force, its sincerity, its magnitude, only formed a total which was wearisome to the object of it, what then? What good could it effect? To what purpose did it exist? She could comprehend that women might pardon inconstancy, where it was loyally confessed and generously atoned for; she could imagine that there might be relations which only became closer, sweeter, and dearer for temporary separation and offences of the passions; but neither of these was her case. Guilderoy neither confessed nor atoned, neither quarrelled with nor admitted that he offended her. He simply went his own way as though he had never married her, and was at once so calm, so courteous, and so careless that such serenity hurt and insulted her more in her own sight than any quarrel with her would have done. Aubrey and her father both spoke of her duties as making patience, silence, and endurance her obligation; but she was too young and too much in love with her husband to resign herself to that mute course without the most painful effort. No doubt they were right, no doubt they were wise, she thought bitterly, but they were not women with aching hearts that they could understand. Did anyone understand? No one in the world, she thought. Everyone seemed to consider that such trials as hers were inevitable and mattered little. Everyone seemed to hold that the material advantages of position and fortune were compensation enough for all pain.

She loved him with all the tender and fanciful poetry of youth and womanhood; but any expression of it had been crushed into silence in her, by the consciousness which came to her very early that it would seem to him inopportune and wearisome. He was not a man to prolong passion after possession, and any evidence of his wife's for him would have been sure to find him cold and critical. He had hinted as much to her once, and her mind, sensitive and receptive to a fault, never forgot the impression given to her by it. He had without intending it conveyed to her the sense that she was his, much as were the other decorations of his state and his position; the companion of his days of ceremony, not of his hours of pleasure, the associate of his rank, but not of his affections.

He had not intended to give her this impression in any

measure so strongly as she had received it ; but it had been given even in the early Venetian days, and could not be effaced. When the speaker is careless of what he says, and the hearer listens with apprehension and self-torment, the latter constantly is wounded when the former had no intent whatever to wound.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

SOME weeks later in the season she chanced to stop her carriage one afternoon at a fashionable club ; old Lord Balfrons, who scarcely ever stirred out of his own houses, had been in person to her desiring to see Guilderoy at once. She did not know at all where he was, and said so, but his uncle was sure that he was at one of his clubs at that hour, and bade her go and inquire. The old marquis was angered and anxious ; he had set his fancy on securing a certain Vandyke which had come into the market, and in his son's absence required the offices of his nephew. He was petulant, eager, and unreasonable ; as great age, like youth, is apt to be when there is a chance that one of its whims may be thwarted ; and Gladys, afraid to vex him, did what she had never done before, and drove to various houses in Pall Mall and St. James' Street.

At one of them the porter, new to his place and ill-versed in the prudence which his situation required, came to her carriage-door with a note in his hand. He said that Guilderoy had not as yet been to the club that day ; but there was a letter which had come for him ; would her ladyship take it ? Gladys took the envelope in her hand, and she recognised the grey olive leaf and the gold letter S. For an instant a horrible temptation assailed her ; she held the note one brief instant in her hand while the colour changed in her cheeks from pale to red, from red to pale, in rapid alternation. In another instant she had conquered the temptation ; she remembered the scorn which her father would have for her if she yielded to it.

She gave the letter back to the porter. 'Lord Guilderoy will take it when he comes,' she said, in a voice which trembled a little despite her efforts. 'To the park,' she said to her servant ; and the horses bore her rapidly away.

The day chanced to be fine ; the sunshine was gay. Her friends and acquaintances saluted her by the score ; but though she mechanically returned their salutations she was not sensible of what she did. The noise of the streets was like the sound of a great sea in her ears, and the yellow light, with the motes of

the sunbeams and the vapours of the smoke dancing in it, was vague and confused before her eyes.

The sight of the letter had confirmed the suspicion which had haunted her for some days. Jealousy seemed to her a miserable and vulgar thing; a wretched weakness which any woman of courage and pride should scout as a degradation; and yet, being only human, she was jealous, and she suffered intensely.

'Does pain always make vileness so easy?' she thought bitterly. That she should have felt such a temptation seemed for one moment to have sunken her fathoms deep in indignity. John Vernon had taught her the code of honour of a high-bred gentleman, the kind of teaching which is unhappily omitted from the education of most women, yet which is more necessary for their own happiness, and that of those connected with them, than all the learning or graces in the world. Had he wholly ceased to care for her? Had he, indeed, ever really cared at all? The doubt which had so long festered and ached in her heart became a certainty. She did not believe that he had ever loved her. In truth he never had.

She did not see him that day or evening at all; they had different engagements. The next day they had a dinner party at home; she saw him for a moment before it, and took the occasion to say to him: 'Would you mind my going to Ladys-road for a few days? I am tired of the hurry of the season.'

'My love, always do what you wish,' answered Guildcrov, with the careless amiability of indifference. 'I would not remain long were I you; it would look odd at this moment.'

'He does not even wish me away,' she thought. 'So little does my presence affect him!'

Aloud she answered, 'I will only stay three days; only time enough to see my father.'

'Your father should come into the world. It is a pity he is so eccentric. He would be the most popular man in London if he would only show himself.'

'He would not care for popularity.'

'I wish you did; at the least it is a very amiable quality, and wins one innumerable friends.'

'You are very popular.'

There was an accent which sounded disagreeably in the ear of Guildcrov in the few simple words.

'I do not think I am,' he said with irritation. 'I care too little about other people. I am too great an egotist, as you and your father are always telling me, and I believe it is true.'

'You are very popular,' she repeated quietly. 'At least with women.'

'You do me much honour,' he replied with a little laugh,



not entirely free from embarrassment. At that moment the first of their guests entered their drawing-rooms. The next morning, very early, before Guilderoy was awake, she left the house, and took the express train of the forenoon to Ladysrood without announcing her arrival there to anyone. In the coolness of the late summer afternoon she drove her ponies over the moor to her father's cottage. The sandy road, running between high banks of marl and sandstone, crowned with blossoming furze, with nodding foxgloves, and with osmunda fern, was the same which John Vernon had taken after the ceremony of her marriage, when he had wished the golden flowers to be a symbol of her path through life.

The evening was grey and still, and very peaceful; there was a honey smell in the air rising from the short wild thyme; it had rained the day before, and there was a delicious moisture in the air; the moors were lonely, here and there girls drove a flock of geese across them, or a herd of red and dappled cattle was seen browsing quietly. The simple familiar scene touched her painfully; it seemed centuries since she had been a child there herself, as careless as the girl that drove the geese, as the young heifers that cropped the thyme: and yet not much more than three years had gone by since she had been found in the hut with the fox cub, and had left childhood behind for ever, not knowing her loss.

She found John Vernon reading a mighty folio of ancient date under the apple trees of his pasture, and for a moment she felt a child again, when she saw the ivy-shrouded porch, the homely sweet smelling garden, the low thatched roof and the lattice window of her own chamber. She never came to Christlea without a sense of peace returning to her for so long as she stayed under its tangle of honeysuckle and of sweetbriar.

'Why did you not tell me, my dear? I would have awaited you at Ladysrood,' said Vernon. 'What can possibly bring you down in the height of the season? Are you not well? You look tired.'

'The life is fatiguing, there is nothing real in it; it is all haste and turmoil.'

'Nevertheless you should enjoy even that at your age. I think they call it being *dans le mouvement*, do they not? I suppose the *mouvement* is much wilder and more breathless than it was in my day. However, my dear child, whatever the sins of the world, I am grateful to them since they have sent you to lighten my loneliness.'

'You will come back to Ladysrood with me, will you not? I shall only be there one day, I must go back on the third; there is a State ball; they would not like me to be absent from it.'

‘I will come with you willingly,’ said John Vernon. ‘You know without you at Christslea,

The summer brings no flowers for me.

‘I love to be here!’ said his daughter. ‘It makes me feel young again.’

When she had renewed her acquaintance with the old man and woman who formed the household of Christslea, with the cocks and the hens, with the birds and the bees, with the red and white stocks and the clumps of sweet-william, with the big old dog, and the tame fox in the orchard, and, to please the old servants, had drunk a little cider and eaten a piece of honeycomb, sitting in the porch, she drove her father home with her in the now darkening night to Ladysrood.

‘Really, my love, you should be a very happy woman,’ said Vernon, as the ponies trotted through the deep ferny brakes of the park over the smooth grass drives, and going at a gallop up the lime avenue of the western entrance, were pulled up before the great house standing glorious and spiritualised in the white moonlight, with all its towers and pinnacles and fantastic corbels standing out against the starlit sky.

‘Because the park is fine and the house is handsome?’ said Gladys, in a tone which he had never heard from her. ‘Surely these are very coarse and material reasons for you to allege? I thought you never weighed externals.’

‘I do not think they are coarse reasons,’ said Vernon, a little coldly. ‘Beauty is a great element in happiness. Not the only factor, certainly, but a very important factor nevertheless, for those who have eyes to see it. I think the possession of an ancient, historical, and beautiful house is one of the most poetic pleasures in life; and I think, too, that the indifference with which many of the owners of such houses consider them is one of the greatest signs of decay in any nobility. Not long ago, too, my dear, you were in love with Ladysrood. I hope you do not tire of it because it is yours. That would be a sad lesson for London life to have taught you.’

‘I like it very much,’ said Gladys; but the tone had no warmth in it. ‘I daresay if my little boys had lived I should have felt affection for it.’

‘You will have other children, no doubt,’ said Vernon, ‘and I should have thought there were already existing reasons for you to be attached to your home.’

She did not reply.

‘I confess I am very attached to it myself,’ he continued, not wishing to dwell too seriously on the subject. ‘It is a really noble place, and though it is very eclectic in the many various tastes which have gone to make it what it is, yet it is

harmonious even in its contradictions of styles and epochs. The only perfect house is a house in which one reads as in a book the history of a race.'

It was nine o'clock. Dinner awaited them, served in the small dining-room of the Queen Anne wing of the house. Vernon ate nothing, as was his custom at that hour, and his daughter ate little; her favourite dogs supplied willing appetites. The dinner over, she and he strolled out on to the west terrace: the air was very warm, the stars brilliant, the sound of the distant sea came to their ears on the silence; behind them were the lighted windows of the wings; before them the quaint green garden, with its high clipped hedges, its fishponds, its yew trees under which Charles Stuart had played at bowls, and Elizabeth Tudor had sat to watch a midsummer masque sparkling amongst the roses. They stood awhile leaning against the balustrade of the terrace, then Vernon sat down on one of the stone chairs, and said quietly:

'Tell me, my love, why have you come to me?'

Gladys did not change her position. She still leaned her arms on the balustrade, her chin rested on her hands; her eyes looked into the dewy darkness of the hushed night.

'I wanted to tell you what a vile and mean thing I nearly did,' she answered slowly; and she told him of her temptation to open the letter.

Vernon sat mute, his face in shadow, and he spoke no word till she had finished quite; even then he waited some moments ere he answered.

'You could not help your longing,' he said at length. 'It is just these inclinations towards base actions which sometimes enter the highest souls which make us understand how the myth of the devil arose. I am thankful, indeed, that my daughter did not stoop to baseness.'

She turned her face towards him, and her eyes were full of tears.

'He does not love me, you know. I have known it a long time. I do not think he ever did.'

'My dear! You are dreaming! Why else should he have married you?'

'It was a caprice—he has so many caprices. Do you remember that line in the *Phædrus*: "What we call winged Eros, the immortals call Pteros for his flighty nature?" Pteros is his love. He knows no other.'

John Vernon listened with bitter regret. He had known that it was so; he had always known it; but he had hoped that she would be young enough and blind enough not to find it out herself—at all events, not to find it out until time should have rendered it a matter of little moment to her. All his heart

yearned towards her in this her first great sorrow, but he believed that sympathy would be the unkindest kindness which he could give her. What was the use of feeding morbid regrets and sense of wrong which could never avail in any way to get her back what she believed that she had lost?

‘I think you speak very bitterly and hastily on small grounds,’ he said, resisting his desire to sympathise with her, and curse the man who had made her unhappy. ‘It does not in the least follow that because a woman writes to him secretly that he invites, or even cares for, her to do so. It may be even an annoyance to him that he cannot prevent. You cannot tell.’

‘I can tell. I have seen them together a hundred times. I believe the whole world knows it—except myself.’

‘Well, let us admit that it is so. I do not defend him. But I do say, my dear, that jealousy in a man’s wife makes her odious to him and ridiculous to the world at large. In a woman who is not his wife jealousy may be permissible, because her tenure is so insecure that she may naturally tremble for its duration. But in his wife it is to others absurd and to him intolerable. *Une femme qui se respecte n’est jamais jalouse*. My dear child, you are still very young; you still know no more than very young women do of the characters and passions of men. My dear, I can assure you of one thing—no man is constant to one woman. Male constancy is not in nature, and therefore it is not demanded in law. I understand that you are in love with your husband, and therefore it is impossible for you to understand why he is no longer in love with you. I can only tell you, my child, that nature has made man inconstant; utterly inconstant through his senses, even when he remains constant in his heart. It is terrible to you; it is terrible to every woman when she learns it for the first time. But the only women who ever arrive at retaining happiness are those who recognise this as a fact, and allow for the man’s infidelity as they would pardon an infant’s forwardness.’

She was silent; her chin still rested on her hands, her eyes still gazed into the shadowy woods which surrounded the gardens beneath her. Her whole soul rebelled passionately at the suggestion that she should accept inconstancy as inevitable and forgive it as immaterial; she had all the vehemence, the narrowness, the exclusive passion of youth and of womanhood.

‘Why did you not tell me all this—before you let me marry?’ she said at last, very bitterly.

Vernon had long known that some day or other that reproach would be brought against him.

‘It would have been no use, my love,’ he said gently; ‘no use whatever if I had. Love had blinded you. And I could not even speak of such things to a child like you. What could

you have understood? You do not even understand much now.'

'I understand, then, you think him right?'

'I have never said so. I do not necessarily approve a thing because I admit its possibility. Abstractedly, I agree with Plato that men should govern their passions, but actually I know that they do not do so until they are at least as old as I am, and not always then. And what I most want you to see is, that even if your husband be indeed unfaithful to you, which is a mere assumption on your part, you will gain nothing by the endeavour to resent what you cannot alter. After all, my child, if a woman cannot keep the affections she has once won, pride should keep her from lamenting her own failure, and tenderness should make her silent on it. You seem to me to be drifting into a state of irritation and of *aigreur*, which can serve no purpose except that of your enemies, if you have any, who may wish to see the breach widened between you and Guilderoy.'

'The women who care for him wish it, no doubt!'

'Well, it is into their hands that you play. You have self-control and you have intelligence. I want you to perceive that, whatever she may feel, only a weak woman and a silly woman degrades herself by the exhibition of conjugal jealousy.'

She was again silent; she bit her lips to restrain the emotion which well-nigh mastered her. She knew that her father was right, but the advice struck on the aching warmth of her young heart like cold steel on warm flesh.

John Vernon's own heart ached for her, and had he followed his impulse he would have given her the mere fond unreasoning consoling sympathy that another woman would have given. But he knew that it would be the most unwholesome thing that he could offer her in such a moment.

'You have said nothing, I hope, to Guilderoy?' he asked her. She shook her head. 'Pray continue to say nothing. If it be not as you suppose, a false accusation would incense him greatly; if it be as you suppose, it could do no possible good. You would drive him into either a subterfuge or a rage. Neither are desirable results. Believe me, dear, a wise woman never asks questions. What is the use of asking them? The person tormented takes refuge in prevarication or in downright falsehood. His character is irritated and injured, and the woman who has worried him sinks farther and farther from any chance of ever obtaining his true and voluntary confidence. Love may be won and confidence may be won, but neither can be bullied.'

'What am I to do then? To learn to care nothing? Is that the best?' she asked in a cold voice.

'God forbid,' said Vernon. 'What did I tell you, my child, the day you first came home after your marriage? That you must care so much that you will give him an affection he cannot get elsewhere. I admit that this requires self-negation, self-control, self-effacement, in a measure which it is exceedingly hard to attain. Most women are self-centred even when they are not selfish. Their egotism is wholly unlike male egotism, but it is apt to be very narrow and very exacting. A man changes and forgets; the woman often does neither; but it does not follow that for that reason she is unselfish, though no doubt she thinks she is, in her close adherence to her memories. My dear child, life is not all a poem nor all a playtime. It is often monotonous, trying, and full of irritation. This period of yours is especially so to you. But you will not make it smoother or happier by thinking yourself wronged on small proof.'

'But if it be true that I am? Then——'

'Then—well, even then I would counsel you to bear it with silence and with dignity. Expostulation and upbraiding are bad weapons, and cut the hand which uses them. I never thought that Lord Guilderoy was of a character which would give you happiness. I did not tell you so, but I told him so constantly. He has the natural faults of a man whom the whole world has conspired to spoil. He is imaginative, impatient, capricious, and inflammable; such men are always inconstant; they cannot help being so any more than the vane can help turning with the wind. But he has many lovable and generous qualities; to you he has been exceptionally generous; think of his finer nature and pardon him its weaker side. That is the only counsel I dare give you, for your sake and for his. Alas! I see you are unconvinced.'

'I am unhappy!' she said in her heart, but she did not say it aloud. She was angered against her father; she had expected from him indignant denunciation and a sympathy which would not pause to weigh or analyse. Her heart was aching bitterly with passionate pain which would have willingly found vent in some rash action; the calm philosophy of John Vernon seemed to her like so much ice given her when she shivered in the cold and asked for a shelter by the fire.

'It is no use speaking of it,' she said, wearily; after a while, 'Let us go in; I think the turmoil of London hurts me less than all this summer silence. One wants to be so happy to bear to look at the stars!'

Vernon rose and put his arm tenderly upon her shoulder.

'My dear child! you will be happy again. You have not bidden adieu to life at twenty years old! My advice sounds very chill and unsympathetic to you no doubt; but it is sound.

It is of no use to rebel against woes which spring from character. You are very young still ; you are a beautiful woman ; if you have tact and patience and forbearance you will ultimately vanquish your rivals if rivals you truly have. But if you display jealousy, if you descend to baseness, to espionage, to re-crimination, you will forfeit your own esteem and you will lose all hold upon your husband. Men, my love, are not merciful to women's tears as a rule ; and when it is a woman belonging to them who weeps, they only go out and slam the door behind them !'

'I shall not weep, believe me,' she said, bitterly ; and she drew herself away from his touch and went across the pavement of the terrace into the drawing-room which opened on to it ; the wax lights were shining on the red satin wall-hangings, the rococo furniture, the Chelsea and Worcester china, the old Delft and Nankin vases ; it was the room in which Guilderoy had told his sister of his intention to marry John Vernon's daughter.

Her father followed her, and looked at her in silence, with infinite pity.

'It was not my fault,' he thought. 'I did what I could. It was the old story, *si jeunesse savait !* Ah ! *si jeunesse savait*, what marriage would ever be made at all ?'

He took her hands in his.

'My dearest Gladys,' he said, gravely, 'I confess that I do not think your life will be very happy. I never thought that it would be. You have a great position and great possessions, but you are not of a nature to be satisfied with these. But it lies with you to retain what one may say are the angels which stand about the throne of life—honour, unselfishness, and sympathy ; they are not the smiling angels which youth loves best, but they have a comfort in them by a dying bed. Try that they shall always be with you. The rest of the heavenly troop will very likely come behind them uncalled.'

The tears, so long withheld, rushed into her eyes ; she kissed the hands which held hers, and left the room. He let her go, and himself paced to and fro the long red room with agitated steps : it had cost him effort to keep so calm a tone, to give only so apparently niggard a sympathy.

'While I am here I can save her perhaps,' he thought. 'But when I am gone ?——'

And he knew that this might be soon, for what he had never told her was the frail tenure on which his own life hung, and the ever-near end of all things which was only warded off by that perfectly passionless and solitary life which he was supposed by her, and by all who knew him, to have selected by free choice.

'When I am gone—' he thought, and the thought was one of acute and intense pain to him. The idea that he would tell her husband his own secret, and beseech his better care of her, passed through his mind; but what use, he reflected, would it be? Guilderoys was gentle, courteous, and kind; easily moved, too, for awhile, and ready to promise impossibilities: he would be sorry, he would be touched, he would swear to be governed by loyalty and constancy; and then, women and the world would surround him, and he would forget. It would be only waste of words. John Vernon never wasted words, and for a score of years had never asked for sympathy; and he had so long kept in his own breast the knowledge of the mortal disease within him that he could not have brought himself to speak of it without painful effort.

## CHAPTER XXV.

'Did you ever hear of the story of Griseldis?' he asked her the next day as they strolled through the gardens.

'Yes; she was a very foolish woman.'

'Certainly she looks somewhat of a fool to us. But perhaps she was in truth very wise; she gained what she wanted in the end.'

'She had certainly a very pitiful spirit.'

'Do you think so? Patience and silence are never pitiful surely. They are grand qualities.'

Gladys smiled with some scorn.

'A donkey is patient, so is a cow. We do not rate them very highly in the scale of creation.'

'Do you often answer Evelyn in that tone?'

'I do not know. Yes, perhaps—I dare say I do. Why?'

'Only that it would possibly tend to make him seek the society of those who did not.'

She was silent.

'We often complain,' continued Vernon, with some dreaminess in his tone, 'that others do not care for us, or cease to care for us; and we seldom ask ourselves if the fault is not ours, if we are not often irritating and even intolerable to them; if we try to understand them in what is opposed to us; if we endeavour to give them what *they* wish, not what *we* wish. Love, which is made such a fuss about, is only an immense selfishness unless it does do this. What do you think? You despise Griseldis; what would you have had her do?'



'Go away.'

'Go away? And leave her children?'

'She could have taken them with her.'

'A dangerous vengeance. And she would have violated her marriage vows.'

'Since he violated his, she would surely have been justified.'

'Ah, my dear! the cases are not parallel. Both psychology and physiology will tell you so if you study them. Griseldis no doubt never studied either, but she was wise enough to act as if she had.'

'When I was a child and read the story, I despised her.'

'Then there is something of true womanhood lacking in you, my dear.'

'Is true womanhood abject slavishness?'

'It is infinite abnegation of self.'

Gladys laughed, and there was a sound of hardness in the laugh.

'Then women of the world have very little of it indeed. They dress, they flirt if they can, they spend money when they have it, and run bills when they have not; they make a fuss over a quantity of useless undertakings which they call charity, or politics, as their taste is, but they never sacrifice themselves for one second of their time; when they take their lovers it is with a view of self-aggrandisement by some affair which will make them more sought after by the world and by other men. There is not an emotion, scarcely even a sensual preference, in any one of their attachments. I wish that you would come into the world. You would see then there would be no place in it for Griseldis if she were revived.'

'Griseldis is a figure of speech.'

'Yes. Nowadays she would have the income of her settlements, the custody of her children, and the consolation of the newspapers!'

'You are rather cynical, my dear. It is not becoming to a young woman, and it is not lovable in an old one.'

'Ah, I wish I had never left you and Christlea.'

'Do you think you would have been contented if you had married a curate or a squire? I doubt it. There is something naturally *grande dame* in you which would have rebelled against small means and narrow lives.'

'I never rebelled when I was with you.'

'No. You were a good child, but you were a child. I did not welcome your marriage, but I doubt if I should have been stoic enough to complacently watch your roses fade, and your years slip away, in the rustic loneliness and homeliness of my cottage. It was lovely to see you in it at seventeen, but it would not have been lovely to see you in it at seven-and-twenty.'

What the French call *un beau mariage* is after all a magic wand to a maiden.'

She did not speak, but she gave an impatient gesture.

Vernon looked at her earnestly. 'Do you absolutely regret yours?' he asked. 'Would you undo it if you could?'

'This moment!'

There was the vibration of intense meaning in the words.

Vernon sighed.

'That is terrible if it be true. I hope you speak in haste and in offence. You are more unforgiving, Gladys, and less generous than I thought you. I thought that your feelings for Guilderoy were of a very different kind.'

'You have a curious tenderness for him!' she said bitterly.

'I do not think I have any,' replied her father. 'But I confess that, as a man of honour, I feel that both you and I are bound to give him some indulgence in return for the confidence he placed in us, and for the great gifts (though you think them mere vulgar considerations) which he has lavished on you in an affection which, if not eternal, must have been genuine. I am the last person on earth to overestimate such gifts; but I am also, I confess, the last person on earth who could tolerate the idea that my daughter, when a man trusted her with his name, and his good name, hated the one and imperilled the other. My dear, it was said by a Greek called Socrates, long before it was repeated by Christ, that it is not right to do evil, and that to say it has been done to us is no excuse or reason for us to return it. Nor can I easily conceive that one could feel any temptation to return it if it were done by a person we had ever once loved!'

He spoke very calmly, but there was an accent of sternness in his voice which she had never heard from him. She felt for the first time in her life that she had in all the world no judge so just but none so unrelentingly severe as her father.

The question which sorely perplexed John Vernon was not to change or control the caprices of Guilderoy, for he considered that hopeless, but how to induce his wife to comprehend them in a measure and to view them, if not with pardon, at least with serenity and silence.

What else was there for her to do?

His natural affection for his child made him angered against the man who caused her mortification and pain, but the sense of justice which was equally strong in him made him conscious that it was impossible for such a man to confine his existence within the limits of such emotions and such actions as would be likely to please the ear and meet the approval of a woman as young as Gladys. There is an instinctive movement towards

freedom, an instinctive aversion to self-confession, in the breast of every man who has not outlived his enjoyment of the warmth of passion and the pleasures of liberty.

‘But alas ! alas !’ thought John Vernon, ‘so few women are wise enough to know this, and still fewer women are unselfish enough to act on it !’

Her dignity, her demands, her sentiments, her desires, her injuries and her rights, loom so large usually in a woman’s sight that she never sees beyond them and thus for ever misses truth.

The exceeding justness of his nature made him able to conceive the irritation that it would be to Guilderoy to account for all his hours to a woman as young, and as incapable of comprehending his errors, as his wife was ; and he could admit the innumerable temptations to inconstancy which his fortune, his world, and his disposition combined to make irresistible and continual to him. Now and then a man will conquer the world in the heart of a woman, but never will a woman conquer the world in the heart of a man. Whatever it be—the world of pleasure, of ambition, or of speculation—the passion of it having once entered his soul will reign there for ever till his last hour.

‘It can never be the same thing between a man and a woman,’ thought Vernon. ‘She—if she be a woman young and innocent—she has a clean bill of moral health, has nothing to conceal, and nothing that she would hesitate to confide. But he has and must have fifty thousand things in his past and present that are not subjects for confidence ; his life cannot be narrowed to what is to be told to his wife. Other women have claims on his silence and honour : in a word he is a man, and requires a man’s large liberty of action. When moralists pretend that it should be otherwise they substitute a conventional fiction which has led to hopeless pretensions and heartburnings amongst women. Even a lover does not give for any length of time the same kind of fidelity that the woman gives to him, though a lover’s fidelity is more stimulated than that of a husband, more tempted to remain true because uncertain of its tenure. Dumas fils and many other writers are fond of pretending that fidelity should be equal in both sexes, but they only put forward a wholly untrue and impossible thesis, and make women wretched because they incite them to demand what both nature and law will for ever unite to refuse them !’

He was grieved that Gladys was no wiser, no more magnanimous than the rest. Had the education he had given her been in fault ? Had sea and moor, and Latin verse and Saxon Chronicle, not tended to make her into stronger stuff than the irrational, egotistical, and wholly unreasonable temper of the

majority of her sex? Why must she, like them, take jealousy for devotion, irritation for passion, offence for dignity, mortification for martyrdom?

'You surely do not mean that Guilderoy would leave you for another woman?' he asked abruptly.

'Oh, no,' she answered bitterly. 'He would neither love nor hate me enough to do anything of the kind. Why should he do it either? He does not think enough about me for me to be the slightest embarrassment to him.'

Her father sighed as he heard.

Against indifference the gods themselves are powerless.

Had Desdemona waked from her murdered sleep she would have found the tenderest and most penitent of lovers in her jealous lord; but the amiable apathy of a careless and unob-servant indifference has no quality in it of that kind which can be roused and changed into devotion or remorse.

'I think he even likes me!' she said with greater bitterness still. 'I annoy him sometimes because I am not pliable, or facile, or amusable enough; but on the whole he likes me, and if receiving an innumerable quantity of presents were happiness I should be in heaven. What he does not give in feeling he atones for in furs and jewels and *bibelots*!'

'I hope,' said John Vernon gravely, 'that you do not say this kind of thing to anyone save to me?'

'No.' She coloured and hesitated: her nature was full of scrupulous truth, and baseness distasteful to her. She always told the truth both in letter and spirit. 'I have sometimes said something, once or twice, to his cousin,' she added.

Vernon was surprised.

'You mean Lord Aubrey?'

'Yes; he has seen it for himself. He is very kind to me.'

'I should have thought he had had no time to spend on a woman's imaginary sorrows.'

'They are not imaginary, and he knows that they are not.'

She was for the first time strongly angered against her father. He seemed to be unfeeling, cold, and unjust.

'The more real they are the less would I speak of them—even to Aubrey—were I you.'

'He is not a stranger. He is a near relative and a dear friend of ours.'

'A very good friend too. But I should have thought he was sufficiently occupied with his friend Britannia, who, from having been a very virtuous housewife in bib and tucker, is now disposed to unloose her girdle and turn into a revolutionary mrenad, and is troublesome accordingly.'

He spoke carelessly, for he did not wish to suggest to her any possible danger in the intimacy of Aubrey, whom he knew

as a man of high honour and grave and lofty character. Yet he said more seriously, after a pause, in which they passed down the long white rose-covered colonnade which was a favourite haunt of Guilderoy's, and where his silken hammock hung at one end ready for his use if he should come there :

'Still I think it would be well, my love, not to talk of these things, whether they are magnified or not by your fancy and feeling. *Il y a une pudeur de l'âme*. That sounds a sentimental saying, but there is a truth in it. Whenever we begin to uncover our soul we are apt to forget that. We are all apt to lose that modesty which is after all the chief beauty of all its emotions. I know quite well that women have a need to unbosom their feelings which the rougher natures of men do not experience. But it is after all a weakness, a tendency which even they should contend against, for it is like opium-eating, it increases with indulgence, and in time saps and destroys the whole vitality.'

'I think you mistake,' said Gladys coldly. 'It is not I who confide in anyone. There are things which speak for themselves, and signs which all who run may read. The whole world will not be blind because a man may wish that it should be so.'

'That is true ; but people will not offer us pity if they think we should take it as an affront, any more than they would offer money to a ruined gentleman if he remained a gentleman still.'

'No one offers me pity,' she replied, haughtily. 'On the contrary, they, I believe, share your opinion that because I have made a *beau mariage* I can want nothing more from earth or heaven !'

'I have never said so, Gladys,' replied her father with some coldness.

She was silent ; conscious that she had spoken wrongly ; conscious also that the companionship of Aubrey was chiefly welcome to her because, though he never put it into direct words, he had from the first moment that he had addressed her given her the sense that he did pity her, and understood why she had reason to be pitied, amidst all which seemed to the superficial observer the supreme felicities and success of her lot.

She knew the fineness of her father's penetration and intuition too well not to be sure that he must see even as Aubrey saw ; and she was angered against him that he did not admit it himself with the indignation which would in her mood of that moment have been refreshing to her.

They had come to the end of the long avenue of white roses ; it was carpeted with the fallen rose-leaves, and overhead the thick foliage, starred with the white blossoms, made the light fall in a green faint twilight about them.

'Let us talk of something else,' said John Vernon. 'Self-analysis is seductive, and Goethe benefited the world by his; but if we are not Goethes we are apt to become Obermanns in the indulgence of it; and even if Goethe had less contemplated himself, I for one should have loved him better. "I have been listening to what the vines told me," he said when he was in Italy. I wish he had listened oftener to the vines and less to "the immense Me." What a charming morning, my dear! How the birds sing, and the leaves glisten, and the roses smile! There is so much in life besides our own passions and pains, if we could but think of it. "*Tant qu'un arbre poussera, ce sera bon de vivre!*" Is there not a certain truth in that?'

'To a gipsy, or to a poet,' said his daughter, bitterly. 'When do we have time to see a leaf come out? We are always surrounded by faces. Can one see the sea amongst the crowds on the beach at Biarritz, or the trees in the woods at Homburg, or the sunset as we drive home from the Bois? Of course the sea is there, and the trees and the sunset are there; but to see them in the sense that you speak of is impossible. One may have a day like this now and then, twice in the year perhaps, and then one realises all that one misses all the rest of the year; that is all. What do I see of all this when we are here with a great party? Of course it is all around us like a *décor de scène*. But I have no time to feel it; there are quantities of things to be done; questions of precedence, programmes of amusement, conversation to make up, toilettes to be changed incessantly, relays of guests to be assorted; of course one feels that the woods are beautiful, that the gardens are charming, but one has no leisure to look at them, or to breathe them in, as it were, as I used to lie under the orchard trees on a summer afternoon, and look through their boughs at the moorlands lying high and purple in the heat; I used to notice everything then, from the dragon-fly in the foxglove to the cloud that meant rain for the morrow. But now I notice nothing; I have no time.'

She looked with a sigh through the arched aisle of the rose-charnille.

Vernon echoed her sigh.

'And yet, my dear child,' he said, 'I fancy that if you were still Gladys Vernon living in my cottage, and there were any other Lady Guilderoy reigning here, you would be very likely to think her lot much brighter and more brilliant than your own. There is always that unkind discontent in human life. The monarch envies the sleep of the cabin-boy, and the cabin-boy thinks if he were only a king with no sea-water soaking his shirt, and no black billows between him and his home! It is always so; it is the rule of existence; and it suggests that

Plato may be right, and that we have come from other worlds which are always haunting us and making us uncomfortable in this one.'

He spoke lightly, for he wished her to think her sorrows rather general than individual; but his own heart was heavy. It was indeed no more than he had always predicted and foreseen, but the realisation of his forebodings did not console him for them.

She went back to the London life, with a sense of added strength and of restored repose. The long, quiet summer day, with its smell from heather-scented lands blowing through green woodlands and over garden flowers, seemed to go with her, and leave some of its peace in her heart.

How safe and secure and easy life seemed to her, spent by those grey solitary seas, in that little quiet hollow, under the gorse-covered cliffs where her father's hermitage was made.

Was he right? Would she have been discontented there as years went on? She did not think so. At this moment that simple homely day of country things and country sights and sounds seemed to her infinitely charming in its peace.

## CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN she reached town after her visit to Ladysrood this day in June, she entered with a sigh the beautiful Palladian house, with its glories of art and architecture, its domed and frescoed staircase, its pomp of powdered servants, and its sweetness of hothouse flowers, dimmed by the grey, sad atmosphere of a sunless London day. The season was at its height; everyone said that it was brilliant and delightful; the park was full of equipages and the streets full of well-dressed multitudes; but to her it seemed dreary as any desert, cruel, pitiless, hateful. Life in the country was so much easier, sweeter, safer. All her weight of pain and jealousy seemed to fall back on her like a slab of stone as she entered that mansion which such countless women envied her.

She had only been away three days, but the accumulation of notes and cards and letters of all kinds was large. She told them to bring her some tea to her boudoir, and having slipped on a teagown made like a sacque of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's, from a picture at Ladysrood, she sat there and glanced at her correspondence. It was just six o'clock; there was a

large and important dinner for royalty on her list for that evening, but there were yet two full hours before she need dress for it. She drank her tea all alone, gazing at the roses which she had brought up from Ladysrood in their baskets of moss, and thinking with a pang of how the sun was slanting westward over the moors and the sands of Christslea, and the little birds were flying amongst the ripening apples, and the fisherboys were rowing over the pleasant sea, and all the balmy air was blowing mild and glad through the tossing lilacs and the bushes of homely southern-wood.

If only she had never left these ! How much happier she would have been, let her father say what he might !

She sighed wearily as she breathed the heavy London air ; heavy even here, where all that artificial and natural fragrance could do to sweeten and to lighten it was done. This beautiful boudoir, with its walls completely lined by old Saxe china, its ceiling exquisitely painted with flowers, its windows draped with lace and cream-coloured satin, seemed to her like a prison after the moorlands, the orchards, and the shore. The hearts in which a deep love of country things is rooted beat ill at ease in cities.

And yet in the country it had seemed to her that its silence and its sweetness made pain harder to bear than when thought was muffled and stifled under the noise and the follies of crowds.

Poor human nature, in pain and anxiety, is like a sick child tossing on his bed, who fancies now this side and now that will give most rest, and finds rest on neither side because there is no rest in himself.

She had not been alone ten minutes before the servant announced Lord Aubrey.

‘Well, dear, so you have been to the country?’ he said, taking her hands in his kindly clasp. ‘It is the best medicine for sick souls, only, alas ! we never have time to take it, or we dilute it so with a mixture of the world that all its virtue goes out of it. How is your father?’

‘He is as well as he ever is,’ said Gladys, and she coloured, for she remembered what her father had said of Aubrey. ‘He said the same as you did,’ she added, after a moment.

‘I was sure that he would,’ answered Aubrey. ‘Think no more of it. Try and enjoy your youth while you can. I have not been enjoying my sober manhood at all at Balmoral. We had five feet of snow on midsummer day.’

And he told her stories of his stay there, and touched on matters of foreign policy in which she had become interested in her attendance at debates. But he found her pensive and pre-occupied ; she was troubled between her natural instincts of



confidence in him and the remembrance of her father's warning to have no friend amongst his sex.

'Has Mr. Vernon told you not to put your trust in me?' asked Aubrey, sadly. 'I thought he knew me better than to do that.'

No, no; he did not tell me so, indeed! He knows how noble and how good you are,' she said with embarrassment. 'But he said that a woman should not have any friend except her husband—that was all, and that it was I who had done wrong to complain to you.'

'But when her husband does not care to be even her friend?' thought Aubrey bitterly, as he said aloud: 'I think your father is quite right in theory, my dear; quite right as a general rule. But, to begin with, I am Evelyn's cousin-german, and am as much interested as you are in his honour and happiness; and, in the second, I am neither a young man nor a thoughtless one. Your father is not, unhappily, enough with you to be your adviser in the world; and I think I may so far try to supply his place without doing or saying anything for which Evelyn would not thank me.'

'Oh, what should I do without you?'

She spoke with warmth and gratitude, and stretched her hand out to him with a childlike gesture of confidence.

'You would do very well, I daresay. Do not make me too vain,' said Aubrey, with a kind smile as he took her hand, and held it for a moment only.

Her gesture had displaced some of the notes and cards lying on a little table at her side; they fell in her lap; as she took one of them up she gave a little exclamation, and showed the card to Aubrey. On it was the double crown of a duchess by marriage who was a princess in her own right, and under them was printed '*Duchesse Soria, née Princesse Brancalcone.*'

'Ah!' ejaculated Aubrey, off his guard for a moment. 'How is that card here? Do you know her?'

'I was once at her house in Venice. I suppose she is in London, and called yesterday. I shall like to meet her again. I think she is the most beautiful woman I ever saw in all my life.'

'She is certainly very handsome.'

'But we never saw her again, as we left Venice the next day, and I fancied that Evelyn did not like her.'

'Did you? Why?'

'He was constrained before her; and he seemed angry that I admired her.'

'Poor little innocent!' thought Aubrey. 'It will be something more trying to you than Olive Shifton now.'

'Do you not like her?' she asked, wondering at his silence.

'Like her? Well, yes. She is very beautiful, as you say,

and, I believe, she is a woman of originally noble character if she had been generously dealt with by fate.'

'Is she unhappy, too, then?'

'Her husband was not worthy of her, I believe; and I know that she lost a child she was passionately attached to a few years ago. But I have only seen her in the world. I have no intimacy with her.'

'It was very kind of her to think of me,' says Gladys gratefully. 'I did admire her so much; I was so young and so shy; I felt so foolish before her.'

'Well, the shyness is cured,' said Aubrey, with his indolent, indulgent smile. 'But the youth is not quite over as yet, is it?'

'I feel very old,' she said with a sigh.

He laughed; he did not wish to refer seriously to his last interview with her; and he foresaw for her trials much graver than any which she had passed through as yet.

A few minutes later Guilderoy entered the little room. He was looking animated and interested. He greeted his wife with graceful courtesy, if with little warmth, and asked, with much more genuine feeling, of Vernon's health. Gladys was touched by his tone and pleased by his entrance; it was so very rarely that ever he came there.

'Perhaps it is as my father says, a great deal my fancy and a great deal my fault,' she thought.

Aubrey soon rose and left them together. He felt an irritation which it was impossible for him to display.

'He is only so kind,' he thought, 'because he wants her to receive Beatrice Soria.'

In truth, scarcely had the door closed on him than Guilderoy took up the card with the double crown.

'The lady you admired so much in Venice is here,' he said. 'I asked her to leave this on you yesterday. Return her call to-morrow. Show her every deference.'

There was a sound of embarrassment in his voice; but she did not notice it. She promised willingly what he wished.

'I thought in Venice that you did not like her,' she said to him, 'and I admired her so greatly. You have never seen her since then, of course?'

'Why, of course?' he replied impatiently.

'Because you would have said so,' she answered in her simplicity.

'I have seen her once or twice in Paris,' said Guilderoy, with some constraint. 'You know she has been in retirement. Soria was killed by another Neapolitan two years ago in a duel.'

'And how came you to see her yesterday?'

‘I met her in the park.’

This was all true to the letter, but not to the spirit. But Gladys, however, was not at that moment critical. She was endeavouring with all her strength to be agreeable and pliant to him, as her father had counselled her to be.

That night she saw the Duchess Soria at a ball at Marlborough House. They renewed their acquaintance with a pleasure quite genuine on the one side, if only graciously simulated on the other.

‘What did I tell you?’ said Lady Sunbury to her cousin Ermytrude as Mme. Soria, in all the blaze of her historic diamonds, passed them with her royal host.

That night Gladys was consoled to see that her husband scarcely approached Olive Shiffton, who was present, and who looked very pretty, and a little angered; the small shooting-star disquieted by the rising of this great planet from the south.

‘Perhaps he is tired of her; or perhaps it was never really anything,’ she thought, almost reassured, and she went home at dawn and went to sleep almost happily, dreaming of the quiet waters of the bay by Christslea and the sound of the fishermen’s voices as they pulled up their cobbles on the beach.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

‘It was not true certainly,’ she said to Aubrey, a week later. ‘You see he never notices her now, and she looks annoyed. You were right to make me promise to say nothing.’

Aubrey looked at her with an infinite compassion which he could not reveal.

‘It is always best to say nothing, whatever be the provocation,’ he answered. ‘These follies pass. They are beneath notice while they last. They are butterflies; you cannot break them seriously on the wheel of jealousy and anger.’

‘They are poisonous butterflies,’ said Gladys, with a sad smile. ‘And you know the butterfly in one stage of its life devours roses and lays gardens waste.’

‘I know,’ said Aubrey. ‘But other roses come, and the garden grows green again some time or another.’

‘Not always,’ she answered.

‘No, not always, I admit.’

He was a man who believed in great passions and great sorrows. He knew that most passions and most sorrows pass, because most characters are shallow; but he knew that there

were exceptional natures, and that these could never easily find either consolation or oblivion. For these few in the garden of life, the roses once dead, few flowers have fragrance.

Olive Shiffton had been a mere caprice, a mere episode; but such caprices and such episodes would be repeated *ad infinitum* in his cousin's existence. How was it possible to reconcile Gladys to this, or even to prepare her for it? How was it possible even to hint to her that the cessation of this offence to her was due to the presence of another woman whose influence was higher, finer, nobler, but infinitely more to be dreaded? Of Olive Shiffton, and of all those whom she resembled and represented, Guilderoy was certain to grow fatigued and intolerant with time; but if Beatrice Soria obtained her power over him again it would be for long, perchance for life.

But it would have been of no use to suggest any danger of this sort, even if his delicacy and honour had permitted him to do so. Fate is cruel and contradictory enough at all times, he knew; but it is often better to let her alone to do her worst than it is to meddle with what is vague to us and will surely escape us in our ignorant handling of it.

With that peculiar self-deception which is so common even in persons of the quickest perceptions and intentions, Guilderoy never supposed that his marriage appeared otherwise than most harmonious to the world. He indeed often went out of his way to do things which should show that it was so. In his heart he repented it every hour that he thought about it at all, but it would have been intolerable to him to think that his acquaintance ever suspected he did so. When Olive Shiffton had once ventured a jest about it, relying on her privilege of intimacy, he had silenced her in a tone which it was impossible for her to mistake. If he had adored his wife he could not have been more reverential to her name before others than he was.

'Sometimes I think he is fond of her after all,' said Ermyntrude Longleat to her brother, on hearing the story of his rebuff to Mrs. Shiffton as it went the round of society.

'No; he is not fond of *her*, not in the least,' replied Aubrey. 'But he has that sentiment that his wife is part of his own dignity, of his own honour, which so long survives all attachment, and exists even where no attachment ever was, because it is a form of personal vanity. He may slight her himself, but he will let no one else slight her; that is not a matter of the affections, but of self-love and of family pride. It is the same kind of sentiment which he has for Ladysrood, though Ladysrood *per se* bores him to extinction.'

'He deserves to lose both Ladysrood and his wife.'

‘Ah, my dear ! if we all had only what we deserve we should be most of us very ill off !’

The season went on its course and closed without Gladys being rudely awakened from this last illusion. Many saw indeed what an utter illusion it was, but no one had brutality enough to rouse her from it, and show her how utterly she was self-deceived.

She only saw that Guilderoy had grown wholly indifferent to the seductions of Olive Shiffton, and was now never seen beside her. It was not sufficient to make her happy, but it relieved her from her keenest and most harassing anxiety, and she never dreamed that it was the presence of another woman, and not any mercifulness to herself, which made Guilderoy almost rudely neglect and ignore his late diversion.

One glance of inquiring scorn from the lustrous eyes of Beatrice Soria as they had passed slowly in review the attractions and the pretensions of Olive Shiffton, had been enough to make him feel ashamed of ever having felt the sorcery of those inferior and venal charms. He had no emotion so keen as his dread lest any gossip of the town should reveal to the Duchess Soria the frivolous story of his latest intrigue. His feeling for the colonial adventuress had been so entirely awakened by physical attractions, had been so absolutely void of any kind of higher feeling, or any shadow of esteem, that it became very rapidly distaste or dislike the moment he felt that it might imperil for him the regard and the patience of the only woman he had ever loved.

For he knew now that Beatrice Soria held a place in his passions and emotions that no other woman had ever reached. She was lost to him, or he believed her lost to him, through his own fault, his own levity ; but for that very reason his whole soul turned to her as the sunflower to the sun that sets.

He had met her often since the evening in Venice ; but though he had been frankly admitted to her presence, and treated with friendship and kindness, he had never as yet been able to pass those outer courts ; he had never been able to recover any one of the forfeited privileges of the past ; he had never been able to tell whether she loved him, hated him, or was wholly indifferent to him. All that he could see was that, to all appearance, no one had succeeded him in her affections. The world coupled no one’s name with hers, and there was no one of her large circle who could in any way claim any distinction above the rest. That was all which he had been able to ascertain or to divine when he had been in her society in Paris or in Italy ; it was all he could tell now that she was in his own English world of fashion, and renewed her acquaintance with

him and with his wife with all the pleasant welcome due to *bonnes connaissances* in society.

The mystery, and what was to him the mortification, of his ignorance of the feelings of a woman who had been once as wax to his hands and as flame to his passions, occupied him and attracted him to the exclusion of almost every other thought.

He had not known what he had felt when he had heard of the death of Hugo Soria, in a duel with another Neapolitan. He could not still be sure whether he felt regret at his powerlessness to replace him, or relief that it had been made impossible that he should do so. He was conscious that it must increase tenfold his own offence against the survivor. Who could ever have foreseen so premature a death, for a man young, fortunate, and singularly skilled in all arts of attack and defence? To him it had always seemed probable that Soria would long outlive himself.

He had seen nothing of her since her husband's tragic end; two years had gone by, and it was understood that she was adhering to the strictest rules of mourning and retreat. Rumour said also that she had received a severe shock, when in the gay, roseate sunshine of Naples, after a ball, the dead body of Soria, with a blood-stained cloak thrown over his face, had been carried into her presence by the masked bearers of a religious fraternity. She had known nothing of the duel, and was crossing the vestibule to go to her own apartments when the terrible procession came in sight across the sunlight of the marble colonnade. Guilderoy could see the scene as though he had been present at it; the marble arches of the loggia, with the blue sea and the blue sky shining beyond them, the warm, rose-hued light of sunrise streaming in from the gardens, and, glowing in the warmth, the figure of her in her ball-dress and her jewels, pausing in the fascination of terror as the black-robed bearers approached with their burden; he could see it all as though he had been there; he never thought of it without a shudder, and he strove to think of it as little as he could.

Two years had gone by since that time, and she had returned to the world. He had seen her twice or thrice, and had found her more beautiful than she had ever been. If her thoughts reproached him for his marriage, her lips never did.

'We will not speak of Hugo,' she had said to him when he first met her, and strove to say something, he knew not what, of conventional regret. But these were the only words of the least familiarity which ever escaped her towards him, and whether she forgave his own faithlessness to her, or whether she resented it too deeply for all words, he, with all his penetration into the souls of women, could not tell. Anyhow Soria was dead and she was once more free: with

her immense personal fortune, her marvellous charm, her great social reputation, and her irresistible power over men, could now be wooed, possibly won, by any living man except himself.

When he recalled the words of his letter of farewell, his cheeks grew red with shame ; what could such a woman as she have thought of him when he had abandoned her like any courtesan, hired and dismissed ? Perhaps she had despised him too absolutely even to honour him by resentment ? He could not tell. Her manner to him remained wholly what it had been in the Palazzo Contarini ; within view of their past relations, such a manner could be but a cloak ; but whether what it covered were tenderness or hatred, reproach or offence too indelible for reproach, he could not tell, only he knew that with her it could not be indifference ; that was wholly impossible to her whole character.

What motive had brought her to England ? True, she was a great lady, allied by friendship and even by blood with many English families, but he felt that she did not come to his country without some intention personally touching himself.

They were in the same world ; they must meet again and again even if neither sought to meet ; he could not credit that it was either mere caprice, or mere accident, which had brought her to grace the last weeks of the London season with her courted presence.

He had gone to pay her homage, he had been admitted with many others, he had had no word or glance which distinguished him from her other acquaintance ; but he had felt the old thrill which her voice awakened in him ; he was conscious of the old delirious charm with which she moved him, and life became for him filled once more with romantic and agitated interest.

‘She is the only woman whom I ever loved,’ he had thought as he left her that day.

He wished his right hand had been cut off before it could have ever written that brutal and ineffaceable letter of adieu. And being a man of the world, he had said to his wife on his return, ‘Call on the Duchess Soria : show her every deference.’

That in wishing her to go there he was transgressing against those unwritten rules of custom and social habits by which men of the world are more often governed than by any laws, social or moral, he knew well enough, but it did not affect him. His mind and his feelings were so centred for the time on the woman whom he had lost, that he was insensible to any other sentiment. To have Beatrice Soria once more beside him in the rose gardens of Ladysrood as in the years gone by, he would have sacrificed much ; at times he thought that he would sacrifice anything. There at last he could find some occasion to learn whether he

were, or not, wholly exiled from that soul in which he had once reigned alone. To believe, as he was forced to believe, that she had grown wholly indifferent to him was the first humiliation in matters of the heart which he had ever suffered. He knew that he had deserved his fate, and had brought it on himself; but this knowledge only increased the bitterness of his mortification, and the keenness of his anxiety to penetrate the mystery of her feeling towards him.

'What does she think of me?' was the wonder incessantly recurrent to his thoughts. She baffled all his desires to learn, as effectually as she had done so in Venice. Ever since he had written that fateful letter in the library at Ladysrood he had never heard, or received from her, one syllable beyond the serene and colourless phrases of an ordinary social intimacy.

The memory of his whole relations with her might have faded out into absolute oblivion for any trace that she gave of seeing in him anything beyond any other of the many acquaintances and admirers who flocked to greet her on her arrival in London.

He seemed forgotten as utterly as no doubt Hugo Sorìa was forgotten, lying in the mausoleum amongst the roses and cypress at Sorrento.

Meanwhile to his wife he was kind. He was grateful to her for her sincere and frankly expressed admiration of her great rival, and he was touched, even whilst he betrayed them, by the unconsciousness and confidence which she showed. After all, perhaps, she was becoming facile, he thought; after all she had certainly many lovely qualities.

Curiously enough the influences which most drew his feelings away from her yet made him so far sensible of her merits that he saw more of her and spoke more to her than he had done for months; and she, attributing the change in him to his rupture with Olive Shifton, was both unsuspecting and almost happy. Perhaps after all, she thought, her father was right; and the silent patience and constancy of absolute devotion might have power over him at the last.

Aubrey, of course, saw her pathetic error; but though his pity for it wrung his own heart, he was too loyal to his cousin and too merciful to her to breathe any hint which could suggest to her the truth. There was nothing in the manner of Beatrice Sorìa to hint it to her. She had been always too great a lady to tolerate the coarseness of the exhibition of passion in society, and even at the time when Guilderoy's power over her had been strongest, she had never chosen that the world should be able to read their secret in their public attitude. She left such vulgarities to such women as Olive Shifton, less certain of their influence and more eager to display their dominion than was



she. 'When you are sure yourself, what matters who doubts?' she thought now; she was herself wholly unconscious that Guilderoy would obey her slightest sign whenever she chose to make one, as the hawk obeys the cry of the falconer. She was in no haste to make it. She had been deserted, humiliated, betrayed; she was not yet certain whether she hated him or forgave him.

'Time will tell me,' she thought, with that strange coldness of patience which runs side by side with the fervours and ardours of the passions in all blood of southern races.

Meantime she called all her wit, intelligence and beauty to her aid, and obtained with them so great a success in this English world of his that all which the consciousness of other men's admiration of what he had abandoned could add to his regrets was added to stimulate revived desires. No hand could 'throw the sulphur' with more perfect skill and sorcery than hers. For the most potent of all her charms was that, beneath all the bland arts of seduction and all the polished powers of a woman of the world, there were the richness and the warmth and the unwise impulses of the heart still living and beating if anyone had power to make them live and beat for him.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

ONE day Aubrey found himself alone beside Beatrice Soria at a garden party at Sion House. They had walked on together under the trees until no one was close to them, and the river was before them.

'We see you so seldom in this idle word, Lord Aubrey,' she said in her beautiful and mellowed English.

'Public life is a hard mistress,' replied Aubrey. 'She is always saying of one in her jealousy:—

*Quod si forte alios jam nunc suspirat amores,  
Tunc, precor, infidos, sancte, relinque focos.*

'She is more unreasonable, then, than other women are in our day, whatever they were in Tibullus's,' said the Duchess Soria. She was herself fond of the classics, and learned in them like Tullia Arragona, and Vittoria Colonna. 'You have no good metrical translation of the Elegies, or the Songs, in English, have you?'

'Alas, no,' said Aubrey. 'I often wonder they have tempted no poet. John Vernon, though no poet, has made, I think, versions of a few.'

'Who is John Vernon? Ah, to be sure, I remember. He is a great scholar and very charming, is he not?'

'I think you would like him. He is not of our time. He reminds one of those studious and lettered gentlemen who lived in the quiet of the country in the days of the Georges, and were content as none of us contrive to be content. How do you like his daughter?'

'Lady Guilderooy?'

'Yes; Gladys, as we call her. What do you think of her?'

The Duchess Soria answered with bland praise. She was a mistress in that delicate art; she never said too much, but the little she said was sweet as the south wind, and never commonplace. In a few slight sentences she showed Aubrey that she saw the character of Guildcroys's wife with perfect justice and accuracy.

'Perhaps she is a little too grave for her years. Men are not fond of gravity, though it is a quality so safe,' she added with a smile.

'I do not think she is by nature grave,' said Aubrey. 'The world oppresses her. There are natures which suffer in it; suffer from its *banalité*, its artifices, its intrigue, its necessities for dissimulation.'

'Perhaps,' said his companion. 'But when the world is always with us it is better to be interested in it. Like whist, it will amuse our old age when our passions are mere pallbearers of a corpse.'

'But there are those who can never feel that interest. She is one of them. What is she to do?'

'She is in love with her husband,' said Beatrice Soria, with a delicate intonation of scorn. 'When that passes——'

'It will not pass.'

'Oh, my dear lord!'

'I am convinced that it will not.'

'You are very cruel to him. He will not be grateful.'

'No, he will not, unless——' Aubrey paused and turned to her with a look which said more than his words — 'unless you, Duchess, who have more influence over him than anyone, would tell him that he should be so.'

'I!'—the word was a haughty refusal in itself.

'You disappoint me,' murmured Aubrey. 'You have so much power, if you would only have as much mercy.'

'My dear lord, that is not my *rôle*. One cannot preach what one has never practised; one cannot advocate what one does not believe in. I have no belief in conjugal happiness. I believe in the joys of the passions, I believe in the pleasures of vanity, I believe in the consolation of children, and I believe—perhaps—in the sweetness of vengeance. But in these alone Lady

Guilderoy will, no doubt, have all these consolations and pleasures. If she require her husband's fidelity also she will be disappointed. No doubt she will be at first disappointed very much. But she will also no doubt find out *qu'on peut s'en passer*.

'You are cruel to her,' said Aubrey, with a sigh.

'My dear lord,' said Beatrice Soria, 'men wish women to behave to them with sultry heat of passion when they want passion, and with perfect absence of passion when they have ceased to want it. They require the tropics one hour, the poles the next. They want fire out of ice; when they have effected the transformation they wish the fire to become ice again. Now men are not gods that by the mere exercise of their caprice they can bring about these changes. On the contrary, they ask for such impossibilities and contradictions that they very often make of a woman who was tender, and malleable, and generous before, a very devil, because they have put the devil of pain and injustice into her. Then they are exceedingly surprised at the issue of their work, and if the evil they have created out of good hurts them themselves they are angry, and cry out, for they are children, and bad children: spoilt, selfish and unkind, never to be trusted out of sight, and always cruel wherever they are loved.'

She spoke with force and warmth and scorn. Her voice was low, but in the mellow and thrilling tones of it there was a concentration of all the indignity, the suffering, the humiliation, disdain, and wrath which had been held in silence in her soul ever since the day that she had received Guilderoy.

She knew that Aubrey was aware of her past relations with his cousin. Circumstances had made him their confidant in the early days of their intimacy; and he had been always on such terms with her as had permitted him some frank expressions of his thoughts. But here he felt that his words had been wasted. She was not a woman to be moved by entreaty or suggestion from any desire or intention of her own.

Aubrey raised his hat and turned away as others approached and occupied her attention.

'Certainly he behaved very ill to her,' he thought; and then the paucity and insufficiency of such poor, trite, commonplace words to express the unutterable, ineffaceable affront which Guilderoy had passed upon such a woman as she was seemed to him like a renewed insult to her. Why should she show any clemency? None had been shown to her.

And yet he thought one might move her still by her heart if one dared to appeal to it. But he felt that he could not presume to seek to learn what she felt, whether of hatred or of love, to the man by whom she had been forsaken.

That the wound given her was still unhealed he knew by the profound and mingled emotions with which she had spoken.

Her lover had killed much in her which had been generous, tender, and magnanimous. He had inflicted on her a wound into which all her best feelings and instincts had sunk, as treasure founders in a deep sea. If he suffered in time for the injury he had done, whose fault would it be? Not hers, surely.

Beatrice Soria glanced after him as she spoke with her other acquaintances.

‘A man and a gentleman,’ she thought, ‘and a true friend. But how like an Englishman, to have no better way of trying to gain a point than to ask for it!’

## CHAPTER XXIX.

‘You have invited Mme. Soria?’ asked Guilderoy, looking over his wife’s list for the house parties.

‘I had not thought of it,’ said Gladys. ‘Will she care to come?’

‘I heard her express a wish to see the English *vie de château*,’ replied Guilderoy. ‘Ask her, at any rate. Ask her in person. I am sure she will not refuse you.’

‘I will try,’ said Gladys.

And she took an early occasion to do so when they met at the last Drawing-room of the season. Beatrice Soria did not reply for a moment; a faint smile came on her beautiful mouth. Gladys wondered of what she was thinking. The next moment she accepted the invitation conditionally; it was possible she would not be in England; if she were she would be happy to come to Ladysrood for a day or two.

‘I am very glad,’ said Gladys in her unconsciousness. ‘Pray do not forsake England so soon. Lord Guilderoy is so very anxious that you should honour us in the country.’

‘Lord Guilderoy is always so amiable,’ replied the Duchess Soria. ‘And when his ambassadress is one so irresistible as his wife, his wishes are always certain to be crowned with success.’

‘When she says those graceful things so beautifully, does she mean them, do you think?’ asked Gladys when she recounted the result of her mission to Guilderoy on her return from Court that day.

‘My dear child,’ said Guilderoy with impatience, ‘what a very childlike question! One would think you were on the

cliffs at Christslea still ! Who ever does mean anything that they say in this world ? These pretty things are the mother-of-pearl counters with which one plays the game of society ; who has the most of them wins the game. Surely you know that by this time.'

'I should be sorry to think it was only that,' she said wistfully. 'I should like her to like me.'

'Of course, she does like you ; she has told me so,' said Guilderoy with some irritation. 'People would always like you if you were more pliant, more amused, more good-natured. Oh, I know you are goodness itself to all your poor people, and that you are very often doing very kind things even in society, for I hear of them. But that is not the amiability I mean. When we do a favour, nine times out of ten we make a foe instead of a friend, for there are very few natures which a sense of obligation does not sour. The amiability which is successful is the knack of saying things gracefully, of seeming interested when we are bored, of seeming to approve when we disapprove, to agree when we disagree, to make the most uninteresting stranger believe that he is the salt of the earth to us : that is what social amiability means, and you never attempt to acquire it.'

'It is hypocrisy,' said Gladys, with scorn in her eyes.

'It is nothing of the kind. Hypocrisy intends to deceive. Social amiability knows that it deceives nobody—at least nobody who has any knowledge of the world—but it avoids friction, it polishes, and softens, and soothes ; it gives everyone a vague sense of *bien-être*, and diffuses an agreeable atmosphere. That is what you have not, and I fear never will have. You are *très-grande dame*—that I quite grant ; but you have modelled yourself too much on my sister, and have imbibed her unfortunate ideas that to be virtuous and truthful it is primarily necessary to be what Sunbury calls "infernally disagreeable." It is not my language—it is his, and I ought to apologise for quoting it—but it is really so inimitably descriptive !'

Gladys coloured with indignation. She knew that she was wholly and utterly unlike Hilda Sunbury in every opinion and quality : she knew that in comparing her to his sister he compared her to what he considered the most unsympathetic and uncompanionable of her sex ; she knew that she had just been doing her utmost to please him and to succeed in her mission to the Duchess Sorïa ; and she felt unbearably and intolerably wronged by the injustice of his censures and the contemptuous impatience of his tone.

'I do not think that you have any right to speak to me in such a manner as that,' she said in a voice which shook slightly, yet was very firm. 'I know that you prefer every other woman

in society to me; but your indifference should not warp you into injustice and discourtesy. I knew nothing of the world when I married you; I have tried to learn all that I could, and the lesson is hard, or I am stupid. I have not the pliancy and facility of the ladies who are your friends; but I must ask you to remember one thing—it was not I who ever sought you, and my father again and again in vain endeavoured to dissuade you from your marriage with me.'

Before he had recovered from his astonishment sufficiently to answer her she had gathered her train over her arm, bowed to him, and left him.

### CHAPTER XXX.

HE had been silent from sheer astonishment at the passionate outburst of one whom he had always considered physically cold and mentally unperceptive.

It was a scene: it was not the first which had taken place between them, but it was the most embittered. There were words in it which stung his conscience, and there were other words which awakened his anger. His very sense that there was a great deal of justice in her reproaches made them the more unwelcome to him. He had thought her unimpassioned, he had even lauded her, and been glad that she should be so; and he saw for the first time that deep down in her soul, under the silence of pride and the ignorance of habit, there were strong and embittered feelings.

He knew women and the world too intimately not to know all that the existence of this feeling might mean in time for himself. He was a man too sensitive to the world's comments and too intolerant of publicity and interference not to see with the gravest apprehensions the possible approach of his wife's entrance into that stage of suspicion and of irritation which usually precedes and produces an exposure to the world of disunion. He knew that he had only himself to blame; he knew that a little more consideration for her, a little more demonstration of affection on his part would have sufficed to shut the eyes and lull the soul of so young a woman. He had believed her cold; he had let her drift away from him, content indeed that she should do so; but he had never supposed either that she had felt his neglect so strongly or would ever express her sense of it so openly. The mere thought of a future in which such scenes were possible alarmed him beyond words. Of all things he prized peace, freedom, and apparent harmony.

'When once they are jealous!' he thought with a shudder; the shudder of a man who has passed through a thousand scenes of invective and reproach in penalty of his pleasures.

Was it possible, he wondered, that she was jealous of Beatrice Soria? Had any one told her the story of his past?

With the yearning remembrance of that one name of magic, he left his house and went where he often went at this hour. It was five o'clock. She was most days to be found at home then, adhering to her indolent Italian habit of never leaving the house till sunset.

The London world was at her feet, and delighted to wait on her. All that was choicest in it had received her gracious hospitality in her own residence at Naples and at Paris, and had many charming memories for which to be grateful of moonlight-garden fêtes at the beautiful Sorrento villa, and dinners of delightful gaiety and wit in her house in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. All that London could offer to her—and it is very much when it is in the mood—it offered in return. The staircase of her hotel was as thronged as the staircase of Buckingham Palace on the evening of a State ball.

She had one of the suite of rooms which are given to royal persons; she had had them filled with hothouse plants and flowers. The London mists and rains were disgusting things to her; she strove to forget them as well as she could in the green twilight of palm leaves and the delicate glories of orchids.

He found her apartments thronged; it was known that she was often to be found at this hour. Princes and ministers, ambassadors and ambassadresses, wits and *élégantes* and dandies, all that was most agreeable, exalted, and exclusive in English society, were there to do her homage. He was only one in a crowd of great people, most of them greater than he. He remembered with a bitter pang the time when, for his sake, her doors had been closed to all comers.

'*Voilà le passé de la Duchesse,*' he heard a diplomatist smilingly say with a glance at him as he passed. '*Qui sera son avenir?*'

The jest made him irritated and mortified. He had been her past indeed!—her all in all, her one exclusive thought, her dream, her empire, her heaven. He had been all that, and he had tired of being it, ingrate that he was! Who would be as much to her future? Anyone?

All that baser quality of men's love which is stimulated and strengthened by the spur of social jealousies and the sight of social successes in the one beloved, all that element which is compounded of vanity, emulation, and admiration increased by the world's admiration, all moved in him, intensified besides by the state of anger and offence against his wife in which he had

come thither. Never, in the earliest hours of his adoration for her, had he believed himself so passionately the lover of Beatrice Soria as he felt that he was now capable of becoming. And she had nothing in return for him except the touch of a soft cool hand, the welcome of a bland sweet smile, the wit of brilliant and polished phrases, all which all others there enjoyed ; all, and no more than that. Never since the evening when he had seen her in the Palazzo Contarini had he before felt so passionately all that he had thrown away in surrendering, of his own free will, his right to the first place in her presence and in her thoughts.

He had thought her chain too closely fastened on him, and he had cast it off in a moment of impatience and fatigue ; but now he felt that there were no dust and ashes of humiliation which he would not eat if he could only by them once more gain the right to kneel at her feet and to become hers once more. He arrived with the crowd and he was dismissed with it. Never once in all the times that they had met had she allowed him any solitary moment with her. He had surrendered his right to any ; he had to learn that such rights could not be resumed at will.

Meanwhile, no sooner had his wife been left alone, than she had grown conscious of how she had sinned against all her promises to Aubrey and all the counsels of her father. She knew that she had lost patience at the very moment when patience would perhaps have rewarded her, and forgotten both wisdom and prudence in the more selfish pain of offended pride.

She had said nothing which was not true ; but there are truths which must never be uttered if union and the peace of the future are desired. The very force and indisputable justice of such truth must constitute, she knew, the heaviest accusation and reproach against him. She had set a guard over her lips through so many trying moments only to fail at the first word which had mortified her.

With the tears streaming down her cheeks she wrote and confessed her fault to her father.

‘I am nothing to him, I know,’ she wrote ; ‘but why must he so often tell me so ? If he would let me return and live with you I would do so, and would not complain. But that he would not like, because it would compromise him before the world.’

And then she tore the letter up, and did not send it, lest it should trouble the peace of the solitary of Christ'slea.

A little later she had to repress, as best she could, everything she felt, and go out to a great dinner. The dinner was followed by two or three receptions, at which she had to be seen.



She did not look well; she was very pale, and her eyelids were swollen.

'How heavy your eyes are,' said Aubrey, meeting her for a moment that evening in the crowd of a great house. 'Tell me the truth, dear. Has anything fresh happened?'

'Nothing fresh,' said Gladys bitterly, 'only what I ought to be well used to; what will never alter as long as I live.'

'No mortal can say that,' answered Aubrey. 'There is nothing really hopeless except death. Whilst a person we love lives we should always deem ourselves happy.'

'I love no one,' she said, in a tone which was almost sullen.

'It is worse than I thought if you have ceased to do so,' he said gravely. 'But it is not so. You deceive yourself.'

They were no longer alone, and he had no answer, nor could he tell from any change in her face whether she had been moved by his words. His heart ached to see that mask of almost sullen indifference and apathy worn on her young features. To what extremity might not love, which was deserted, and youth which was unhappy, be driven half in despair and half for sake of vengeance? He would not point out the way to vengeance, but other men would. Though her apparent coldness and her contemptuous inattention to them chilled and daunted many of her wooers, yet there were others whom such repulse attracted. She lived in a society and in an age where fidelity is ridiculed or received with incredulity, and wherein compensations and condonations go hand in hand, and are rarely refused. How long would she be without learning the lesson which everything conspired to teach her? She might learn it soon, she might learn it late; but learn it some time or other she would assuredly. Has not Ovid said that Helen, being left alone, was innocent of any fault? *Helenen ego crimine solvo.*

## CHAPTER XXXI.

THE essay on Friendship had been finished, and had found its way into print in a famous review, though its writer declared it a mere spurious and worthless offspring of the Lysis. Guilderoy had on more than one occasion amused himself with casting his thoughts on paper, and the world assured him that he might attain eminence in letters if he cared to do so. But he considered this flattery; and, even had it been true, he would have considered it far too much trouble to obey its suggestion.

Aubrey read the essay when it appeared, and approved of it.

‘Only allow me to say, my dear Evelyn,’ he observed one summer day at Ladysrood, when they were alone on the terrace, ‘that it is odd that any man who has such admirable theories as yours should go so utterly against them in practice as you do. I know no living person who is so little heedful of the feelings of others, or so little constant in his own feelings, as yourself. Pray forgive me the remark. I am no doubt leaving good manners outside the temple of intimacy in presuming to make it.’

‘You are quite welcome to make it, and no doubt it is true enough,’ said Guilderoy, who nevertheless was not pleased. ‘I see how things ought to be ; I do not pretend to make them what they ought. I do not think that I am a false friend as you imply !’

‘I do not think you are a friend at all,’ said Aubrey. ‘You do not care about men’s friendship, and with women you have, if you remark them at all, something much warmer than friendship. But what I meant to convey is that, despite your admirable knowledge of the sensitiveness of the human soul, and of what is due to it in intimacy, you entirely neglect observance of those duties.’

‘What do you mean ?’ said Guilderoy, a little annoyed.

‘What I say,’ replied Aubrey. ‘You know the duties of a sympathetic friend, but I fear you never fulfil them.’

‘We are not bound to put our theories into practice. If we were, authors would be a race apart—the missing link between man and the angels.’

‘Yes, I suppose no writer ever did, except Socrates, and he got poisoned for his consistency.’

‘And he was not a writer, by your leave, my dear scholar ; only a teacher.’

‘True ; but really, Evelyn, your theories are so charming that you should attempt to carry them out in your own life, and perhaps you would be the happier for doing so ; egotism is tempting, but it is not always so happy as it looks.’

‘I am not more of an egotist than most men,’ said Guilderoy, moved to a certain irritation. Aubrey raised his eyebrows.

‘In what way am I ?’ asked Guilderoy with petulance. ‘Pray let us speak as if we were at the bottom of her well with Truth.’

‘With all my heart, but Truth, like most ladies, will probably move us to quarrel about her.’

‘Oh, no ; pray continue.’

‘Well, have you ever lived for anybody, except yourself, in your life ?’

'For a little while I did,' said Guilderoy honestly; and he sighed, for he was thinking of the first period of his love for Beatrice Soria.

'Oh, no, you did not even then,' said Aubrey, who knew what the sigh and the answer meant. 'It was all self-indulgence, almost all love is; at least when it is victorious.'

'How can you divorce self and the passions?'

'Not easily, I admit.'

Aubrey was silent a moment, then he said suddenly:

'Will you allow me to ask you one thing? Do you think your wife is happy?'

Guilderoy's face flushed slightly.

'She is not a happy disposition,' he said evasively. 'The world does not amuse her. Then she has lost two children; and she has very over-wrought expectations.'

'Of you?'

'Of me, of human nature, of life in general. Because her father has the virtues of a saint, and a solitary, she expects every man to be a Saint Jerome or a Basil.'

'Between Jerome and Basil, and Lovelace and Wildair, there is considerable room for something else; they are at the two ends of the ladder of human desires.'

'She sees nothing between the saint and the profligate.'

'A woman usually only sees extremes. But I do not believe she knows anything about profligacy, and I think you could easily make her happy if you chose.'

'My dear Aubrey!' cried his cousin with much impatience, 'if there is a parrot phrase which is absolutely senseless, it is that about making a woman happy! She *is* happy, and you are happy in her happiness, and your own, spontaneously, *sans chercher ni vouloir*; just as birds are in the summer woods; and there is no happiness at all for either of you. Happiness is not a kind of pastry that you mix and roll out and put in the oven till it is done to a turn. It is an immense pleasure, born out of heaven knows what, half of the senses and half of the soul, but no more to be stabled or harnessed than Guido's coursers that run with Aurora. Happiness elaborately *made* would not be happiness; it would bear the traces of effort, and would be utterly without charm.'

'Nevertheless in your essay you admit that friendship is a delicate plant, which requires fitting atmosphere and culture; so also is love surely; neither will resist neglect.'

'Are you speaking of love? I thought you were speaking of my wife,' said Guilderoy in that tone of indolent insolence, which was often his shield when he did not choose to be questioned.

Aubrey rose and did not reply. He did not care to continue

the argument in that tone ; and he feared that he should say too much if he said anything more.

‘Why should you be angry?’ said Guilderoy. ‘She might be if she were here. I assure you it is the only word of disparagement which I have ever permitted myself about her. She is exceedingly handsome ; she is immaculately good ; and she is the daughter of the man I most respect upon earth. But all these excellent things do not make up happiness. Happiness is the child of harmony, who the Greeks tell us was the child of Eros.’

Aubrey remained silent ; he felt more anger in him than he wished to betray.

‘You should have married her, not I,’ continued his cousin. ‘You would have suited her most admirably. You would have buried yourselves in the northern mists at Balfrons, and a Blue-book would have occasionally visited you as your only *oiseau bleu*.’

‘You certainly should not have ever married at all,’ said Aubrey, who did not care for those jests. ‘Catullus puts Eros and Hymen in the same strophe, but no one else ever succeeded in doing so.’

‘And he did not do it in practice, only in verse,’ said Guilderoy.

‘Hush, she is coming to us,’ said Aubrey, as he saw the tall and slender form of the mistress of Ladysrood approaching the terrace on which they were sitting ; the old grey stone terrace of the west front, of which the buttresses and flights of steps were half smothered in virginia creeper and banksia.

Guilderoy rose, and, with that graceful courtesy which he never neglected, took off his hat, and gave her his seat, which was the most comfortable of all the lounging-chairs there. He stayed a moment or two speaking of trifles, and then went away. She looked after him wistfully. She would have preferred less elaborate courtesy, and more of his time.

‘I am afraid I have disturbed him,’ she said with apprehension.

‘Not in the least ; we were just going away,’ said Aubrey, hastily, as he thought, ‘Good heavens ! is he bored if he has to talk to her for ten minutes ? And yet if she were anyone else’s wife, he would spend whole years at her feet, I am certain.’

For that one August day he was alone with them. On the morrow some half-hundred of fashionable people were to arrive and bring their London and Paris life into the green gardens and old walls of Ladysrood, which always seemed to its châtelaïne in discord with them. But it was only by having the world with him there that Guilderoy could be induced to pass some of the late summer or early autumn months at home. He loved

the place in his own way, but life in it wearied him more since his marriage than it had done before, when he had been able to bring with him any questionable preferences of the moment or else stay there in that complete solitude which at rare intervals soothed and pleased him.

Aubrey looked at her where she reclined in the long low chair. She wore a white wool gown without ornament of any sort. Her figure was still very slender, but her bosom was full, and her arms were rounded, her shining hair hung in loose waves over her forehead and was coiled behind in heavy masses fastened with a gold comb.

How strange it seemed to him that his cousin should pass his life in almost absolute indifference to her! The vision which Guilderoy had in jest put before him of a happiness which might have been possible for himself, made his eyes dim for a moment as he gazed at her. But he quickly banished so enervating a fancy, and spoke to her.

'I wish,' he said with hesitation, 'that you could interest yourself more in the life which goes on around you. I know you do not care for it; your early life unfitted you for it, but it would be well if you could simulate some enjoyment of it; you would become more popular and Evelyn would be better pleased.'

'Popular!' she repeated with the accent of some young duchess of the eighteenth century to whom some one should have counselled remembrance of the mob.

'I think it is quite disgraceful,' she added, 'the way in which all society, with princes at its head, courts popularity nowadays. I should never have supposed you would have cared for it.'

'My dear child, princes feel their thrones slipping from under them; they catch at any straw. But I did not mean popularity for you in any low sense of the word. I meant that you would be more generally liked, and so more able to exercise the kind of influence which you would wish to possess. When society is aware that you think it a flock of geese, it revenges itself by hissing loudly behind your back.'

'It is welcome to do so.'

'Ah! that tone is just what I complain of; it is too cynical, it is too unsympathetic; you are too young to use it. When the worst is said of it, there remains a great deal that is interesting and profitable to study in society, and when you know that Guilderoy is always anxious that you should be admired and liked, I do not consider that you ought to shut yourself up in a shell of apparent ill-humour, which is not really in any way your nature.'

'I think it is becoming my nature.'

'God forbid ! I hope you will soon have other children with whom you can play on the lawns yonder, and be a child again yourself. Then you will forgive society, which is after all only a very sick and froward child itself, and breaks all its play-things.'

Her face clouded, and she did not reply ; her brows were drawn together in a frown, half sullenness, half sadness, as she looked out from under her long curling lashes at the green woods of the home-park which stretched in the distance as far as the eye could reach.

'You see,' she said at last, 'you see that I can never amuse Evelyn. He does not even talk to me if he can help it. He is always amused and interested with other women ; never with me.'

'Perhaps you exaggerate that fancy.'

'Oh, no ; I felt it in Venice that first year I am tiresome to him. No one can alter that. It is a calamity ; nothing can change it.'

'It is not an uncommon calamity in marriage. Incessant association is so often fatal to attraction. It is no fault or failure in either very often. Simply proximity has destroyed charm. But I know, dear, this sad philosophy can be no comfort to you. It is as useless for consolation as the cold physiological demonstration of a surgeon to a mother that her dying child has had the seeds of death in him from his birth.'

'Certainly, it does not console me,' she said with a bitterness which was growing upon her every year, more and more. 'Physiology and philosophy explain everything after their own fashion ; but I never see that they make anything any better.'

'No,' said Aubrey. 'Whether we are suffering from bodily or mental pain the diagnosis with which our physicians interest themselves has little consolation for us, especially when it leaves us uncured and incurable.'

'Tell me,' she said abruptly. 'You have known him all his life. Is there any woman whom he really loves ? Sometimes I think there is.'

'I hope there is—yourself.'

She made a gesture almost of anger. 'Pray do not fence with me, and spare me these *fadeurs*. One does not look for them from you. Answer my question.'

'I am not in his confidence,' replied Aubrey, which he could say with a measure of truth at least. 'I do not think, if you ask me my frank opinion, that he is a man who has ever distressed himself with a truly great passion. Men who merely seek in love their own self-indulgence are not lovers in the romantic sense of the word, they are not lovers like Montrose or

Stradella, or Chastellard. To Henri Quatre, Petrarch would have seemed a poor fool.'

'These are generalities,' she said, impatiently.

'And you want personalities, like a true woman?' said Aubrey with a smile. 'Well, my child, you would not get them from me; even were I in possession of my cousin's secrets, which I am not. I think your greatest enemy could do you no worse turn than to help you to try and rake amongst the cold ashes of your husband's caprices.'

'The ashes may be warm,' she said with impatience. 'Or there may be fresh fires.'

'If there were,' replied Aubrey, 'believe me you would only make them burn furiously by throwing on them the phosphorus of an irritated and inquisitive jealousy. Believe me, dear, there is only one *couvre-feu* to which a woman can trust to extinguish a glow which offends her; it lies in her own wisdom and devotion. And do not again try to make me fill the office of tale-bearer. If I knew anything of his affairs, which I do not, I would not descend to such an ignominy, even to serve you.'

She coloured at the implied rebuke, and was silent.

'You are not so amiable as you were, my dear,' said Vernon to her on one of the days in which she was with him alone for a few hours.

'I daresay not,' she answered, almost sullenly. 'The world does not make one amiable.'

'That depends on disposition,' he answered. 'On the whole, I think people who live in it are more amiable than those who live out of it. The friction with others and the variety of interests which it offers tend to give tolerance, pliability, and good humour to the character. The world is to men and women what school is to children; at the expense of originality and meditation it teaches social wisdom and moderates over-expectation.'

'To some, at least, it teaches all forms of self-indulgence,' she said bitterly.

Her father looked at her.

'You are thinking of Guilderoy?'

'Yes.'

'Then I think you do very wrongly, my dear. He has many better qualities than his self-indulgence, which is only the necessary outcome of great freedom to enjoy pleasure. Why not dwell rather on those?'

She said nothing.

'I do not think you have followed the counsels I gave you when you first returned here from Venice,' he continued. 'I do not think you at all endeavour to do what I told you to do.'

‘What would be the use if I did? He would only consider that I bored him if I offered him any demonstrations of attachment. No one can make the happiness of another person when they are wholly outside the other’s life, as I am outside his. I have not the faintest idea of his real interests, his real desires, or of what he does in the time he is away from me, which is by far the larger part of his time.’

Vernon sighed. He had foreseen it all as clearly as though a magic crystal had shown it to him. But that made it none the less painful to him.

‘He is kind to me in many things—I do not deny it—and very generous,’ she continued. ‘But I feel that I am only wearisome to him, just as Ladysrood is, though he loves Ladysrood, and he does not love me.’

‘Why should you think he does not? After these years you cannot expect the carresses of a lover.’

‘He never loved me, never!’ she said sadly. ‘It was a caprice. He has so many caprices! He regrets the cost of this one every day of his life, I know, though he is a gentleman and does not say so.’

‘Are you sure you are not morbidly fanciful, my child? Cannot you be content with the sense that you are much nearer to him than any other woman can be?’

She smiled. The smile was not the one which had used to come on her face.

‘I am much farther off him than any other woman is! He would tell any stranger anything sooner than he would tell it to me. My dear father! All that you say, they call *vieux jeu* in our world: that world which you think should make me so amiable!’

‘I may have old-fashioned ideas, dear,’ said Vernon, pained by her tone, ‘but however fashions change, I do not think humanity changes so very greatly under them; and *tant que le monde est monde*, I think that a woman will make her own unhappiness by exaggeration of her wrongs, and that a great and genuine devotion on her part will touch any man soon or late.’

‘You are an optimist; he always says so.’

‘Does he? Yet I was very far from optimistic when I endeavoured to dissuade you both from your union.’

She knew that he had indeed done his best to prevent her marriage, and she said nothing more.

‘My dear,’ he added very gravely, ‘the fatal mistake of every woman is to weigh the man in her own scales. You might as well say the rosemary growing yonder in the earth has the same needs and the same habits as the sea-gull flying over there. It is this horrible pretension, or mistake, or ignorance, which-



ever it is, in the minds of women which makes their own misery in so much. I am afraid you are now making it, as so many of your sisters have done before you to their cost. The man is all in all to the woman, but she can never be all in all to him, except in some few first hours of delirium. The woman can receive no happiness, physical or mental, save from her beloved; but he can find pleasure, if not happiness, with those whom he despises. "*L'homme aime pour le plaisir qu'il reçoit; la femme aime pour le plaisir qu'elle donne.*" Possession and intimacy confirm and strengthen the passion of the woman; but in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they destroy the man's passion altogether, and leave at their best but gratitude or tenderness behind them. These are painful truths which every woman, my dear child, has to learn. The happy women are those who learn, and do not fret at the lesson. The unhappy are those who incessantly strive to resist the laws of nature. I want you to be happy. But happiness will not come by any effort that you make to dwell, or to force a man to dwell, in an imaginary heaven of impossibilities. Nor will it come through any turbulence or bitterness of jealousy.'

Again she did not reply. Her heart gave no echo to the words, and she felt almost bitterness against her adviser for the tolerant wisdom of them. 'He is not a woman; how can he tell what one suffers?' she mused impatiently.

'I suppose I erred in her education,' thought her father with sorrow. 'I suppose I forgot that though in so innocent a way, yet she lived wholly for herself when she was with me, and had nothing to teach her how to live for others. It seemed to me very lovely and harmless, that flower-like life of hers amongst the boughs and the birds. I suppose I forgot that it would not fit her for those colder realities which the selfishness of every man makes the woman suffer from when his affections desert her. And yet I tried to make her somewhat wiser, somewhat truer than most women are; and I used to think I had succeeded. He has undone my work very rapidly—he and the great world together.'

Gladys meanwhile left him with a sense of injustice done to her.

The tender sympathy of Aubrey was more welcome to her than her father's uttered and implied censures. She felt what she had said—that it was of no use for her to be prodigal of her love for a man who was not so much ungrateful to it as he was, from indifference, unconscious of it.

'I care for him, but then he does not care for me!' she thought as she drove through the green twilight of the Lady's-wood woods.

Who could help that? What effort could change a dead

passion into a living one? Sooner would the buried bodies lying in the thyme-scented graveyard, which hung above the sea at Christ'slea, arise and walk.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

THE next day Aubrey left Ladysrood, and Guilderoy went to Paris for a week; at the end of the week their first circle of guests would arrive; at the end of the second week there were to come to them some royal personages, and with them the Duchess Soria.

Gladys had five days of quiet and rural solitude before her. She spent them almost entirely with her father. When the great house was filled the life in it was more tedious to her even than London; her time still less her own; her patience and courtesy still more severely taxed. Whatever society might be to others, to her it seemed a treadmill never resting, a *camisole de force* never laid aside, a formula incessantly upon the lips, a conventional imposture never abandoned for a moment. She was a child still at heart, and all its ceremonies and etiquette and precedence were to her as the weight of her jewels and the length of her train had been to her at her first day at Court. Oh, for one sincere word in the midst of all those polished murmurs of compliment and calumny, and dissimulation, and veiled indecencies, and masked innuendo!—so she thought a hundred times a week in it.

Older women, women either colder in their affections or warmer in their passions, could find interest and excitement in its intrigues, and its conflicting and contrasting interests; they could move in it as in a labyrinth of which they had the silken clue, they could play in it like movers of pawns and knights at chess.

But she could not find that distraction and compensation. There was something in her of her father's distaste for the hurry, the excitation, the falsity, the intrigue, and the incidents, trivial and serious, which make up the interest of modern society had no power to attract and absorb her.

In these few days preceding the arrival of her husband and her guests she was soothed and strengthened by the quiet country atmosphere in that homeliness and tranquillity which had been about her from her cradle. When she was with her father, self-sacrifice and fortitude seemed still possible. In the feverishness of the world she lost her hold on them. He

tried to make her see that there was nothing new in what she suffered from ; nothing more than was usual and inevitable. He tried to imbue her with that toleration and indulgence which it is the hardest of all trials to attain in youth. He could add little that was new to what he had said when she had before consulted him ; but that little he strove to put before her with sympathy and pity, though its philosophic reasonings seemed very cold to her.

To the imagination which pictures, and the heart which craves, richer, fuller, more complete joys than human passion and human possessions can ever bestow, the assurance that such perfection is but a dream, and that the passions can only be the flower of a day, appears a dreary creed which lays the whole world barren.

‘My dear child,’ said Vernon, ‘you have only found what most women who know much about men do find, that the man they love is seldom either Achilles or Hector, either Sydney or Montrose, either heroic or idealic, but is generally rather like a sick and fractious child who cries for what he cannot get, and beats the hand which tries to soothe him.’

She smiled but sadly.

‘My dear, I only speak thus of my own sex, in their passions,’ he continued. ‘There are other things in life besides its passions, though I admit that there are none which colour it so deeply, or so infuse into it, irrevocably, bitterness or sweetness. But there are other things ; it is in these other things that you should find your allies. Guilderoy is a man whose whole life should not be squandered in falling in love and falling out of love. He has position, opportunity, talent ; he should have as time goes on some other aim than breaking the hearts of women, whether your heart or those of others. It is with that side of his life that your alliance, your efforts, your interests, should be. Cannot you see that?’

‘I cannot see what does not exist,’ said Gladys coldly. ‘He has no other object in life than his own pleasure. He says it is the only wise philosophy. I suppose it is, when you are rich enough to carry it out.’

‘It is the Epicurean ; but what joy will there be in that without youth ? He forgets ; he makes no provision for age.’

She was silent ; age to her seemed so far off, that it was without shape or meaning in her eyes ; her whole soul was centred in her present.

Her father looked at her. There were regret, anxiety, disquietude in the regard.

‘Gladys,’ he said abruptly, ‘he told me once that he thought you were cold. You are not so. Far from it. How have you given such an idea of you to a man who is your husband ?’

She pulled some little branches of the sweetbriar hedge to her nervously. She did not reply.

‘How?’ repeated her father. ‘You must have failed to respond to him in some way? You must have disappointed him at some time? You must have shut your heart away from his gaze? Will you not answer me?’

Her head was turned from him and her voice trembled as she replied: ‘I so soon saw that he cared so little.’

Everything seemed to her to be told in that.

‘Are you sure that was not your fancy?’

‘Quite sure.’

‘Even when you spoke to me that first day after your return four years ago? You remember?’

‘Yes; even then.’

She sighed impetuously.

‘Even then,’ she repeated. ‘He had paid a great price for me and he regretted the price—just as he does again and again when he bids for a picture at Christie’s, or the Hôtel Drouot, and it falls to him. The picture has never been painted which could satisfy him when he gets it home!’

Vernon echoed her sigh. It seemed to him hopeless to change a state of feeling built on caprice and on indifference, on a temperament as shifting as the sands, and a discontent grown out of self-indulgence. He looked at his daughter with irrepressible sadness.

It seemed such a little while ago that she had run along by that sweetbriar hedge in the sunshine, no taller than itself, a happy, careless, fair-haired child, fresh as a ‘rose washed in a shower.’ And she was here a great lady, an unhappy woman; a jealous and almost deserted wife! He had foreseen it all himself, but his past prescience of it made its sorrow none the lighter.

Gladys sighed wearily.

Like all persons of poetic and ardent mind her ideals in youth had been high and romantic; the man who had knelt at her feet in the library of Ladysrood, with the Horæ on her knee and the sunlight through the painted panes falling on his handsome head, had seemed to her lover, knight, and hero all in one. And what had she found him? Only a master, negligent yet exacting; indifferent yet arbitrary; restless, hard to please, and quite impossible to content; who took his infinite social and personal charms elsewhere; who spent his time and his passions with others, and who considered that he had fulfilled all the obligations of his position to her, when he had given her his houses to direct and his family jewels to wear.

‘Yes, my dear,’ John Vernon said in his own thoughts, silently answering her own silence, ‘you make the common

mistake of all women. You think that the gift of yourself gives you claim to the man's eternal affections. It does not. It cannot. I know this seems harsh to you, and cruel. But it is the law of sex. Here and there are *âmes d'élite*, who suffice solely and wholly, physically and mentally, to each other; but they have not met early in life, and they have not married each other. Where marriage is hostile to love, is that it substitutes material gifts of worldly goods, worldly advantages, worldly position, gifts of houses and money and land, for the sweet spontaneous gifts of the passions and the affections. In savage races the man can treat his wife how he will, because he has given so many ponies, or cattle, or buffalo-skins, for her. In civilised life he feels in the same way that he has paid for her in material matters, and so is absolved from other and more spiritual payment. There is something to be said for the man's views, only where is the woman who will ever perceive or admit it?'

But all this he could not say to her.

'If you have living children you will be happier,' he said aloud, as the only suggested consolation of what he could think.

Her face flushed, and she rose and pulled the shoots of the sweetbriar impetuously off their stalks.

'I shall never have children,' she said in a low and sullen voice. 'Do you suppose that I would live with him—without his love—only because he wishes for legitimate offspring? Cannot you understand? I have made him know that ever since—ever since—I first felt that he did not care for me.'

'And he accepts the condition?'

'When I tell you that he does not care?'

The colour burned in her cheeks; a dark cloud of anger hung over the fairness of her face.

'One sees it in the world, I know,' she continued; 'women who go on bearing children year after year to men whom they know care nothing for them, but they must be without spirit or senses, or dignity or delicacy; they must be the wretched beasts of burden that your Griseldis was!'

Her father looked at her with infinite pain.

'It is worse than I thought, he said briefly. 'I do not know how far he may be to blame; he has never opened his heart to me and I cannot judge; but I do not think that you cherish the spirit which can bring happiness either to you or him. And I do not think that you have any right to refuse that natural burden of maternity which, however little you knew of life then, you still knew would be your portion if you married him.'

'The moment that he has ceased to love me he has set me free from all such obligations,' she said passionately. 'My little

children lie in their graves. When I shall lie with them, he can have others by some other woman, who will be more grateful for his gifts and his position than am I.'

'You pain me, Gladys,' said Vernon, with a sigh.

'I cannot help it,' she replied, selfish with that concentration of self which the sufferings of the heart and passions always entail.

'When I am with you,' she said with the tears rising to her eyes, 'I am in much what I used to be. I feel your influence. I believe as you believe in the power of self-sacrifice and patience. But I leave all the good you do me within this little gate. I cannot carry it out into the world. There I am only foolish, jealous, embittered, made cold or made wicked, one hour this, one hour that. In the world I see that women who are forsaken find consolation. Why should I not find it if I can? One of your classic writers says somewhere that a woman has always *one* power of vengeance. Sometimes I feel that I will try and reach his pride with that, since I can touch in no better way his heart!'

Vernon was silent for some moments; he understood all the conflicting impulses at war within her, and he was at once too merciful and too wise to meet them with the empty conventional arguments of what is called in the world morality. He believed, like Aubrey, that it is only by the affections that women can or should be ever led.

'Other women have done that,' he said at last, 'and have repented it all their lives long. We cannot wound what we love without wounding ourselves more profoundly still; and to dishonour ourselves because we feel ourselves humiliated seems to me the act of madness; it would be as wise to cut our throats because the cold makes our hands ache on a winter's day. By what you tell me, you have set free your husband by your own choice; you cannot complain if he construes his liberty with a man's liberal and loose reading of the word. You have been too quick to consider yourself neglected, and too quick to repudiate your own obligations. You have beauty, you have youth, and you have the honour of the man you love, or have loved, in your hands. If with all this you can obtain no influence on him, and cannot rise to a higher level than that of your own personal affronts and suspicions, you are not what I thought you; and all the care and culture I have given to you, and all the efforts I have made to render you in some little degree wiser and kinder than other women, have been lost. To feel that it is so will be the crowning disappointment of my life, which has been neither so tranquil nor so contented as others think it. For I am mortal, and I have found, like all mortals, that "life is a series of losses." Do not let me lose you at least.'

She was touched to the quick, if she was not convinced. The tears fell upon her father's hand as she kissed it.

But she promised nothing.

'Do not let us talk any more of this,' said Vernon. 'Feeling loses its force and its delicacy if we put it under the microscope too often, whether you be living or dead. I believe that you will always live your own life in such wise as I should most wish. In dishonouring yourself you would dishonour me ; you will remember that. Let us go down to the shore. Nothing soothes one like the sound of the sea. Who has been mistaken enough to say that Nature was not loved in classic eyes? Why, all Greek and Latin verse is full of it, from the roar of the waves in Homer to the chaunt of the grasshopper in Meleager, and the birds singing in the rosemary of Tibullus !'

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

VERNON was seated a few days later in the wicker chair of his garden, with a volume of Terence on his knee, and the dog at his feet, when the old woman in cotton kirtle and coalscuttle bonnet, who served as letter-carrier for some twelve miles round, brought him a packet of publishers' letters, and newspapers, and pamphlets, and one other letter in a hand unknown to him, and enclosed in the thick blue paper which usually bespeaks a legal correspondence. When he read it he found himself the master of a modest little fortune. A very distant relation in the colonics, from whom he had had no communication for twenty years, and of whom he had scarcely ever known anything, had died childless, and had left him the proceeds of a long life of sheepfarming, 'because he is the only honest man I have ever heard of,' said this New Zealand Diogenes in his testament.

The letter of these lawyers, who were wholly strangers to him, moved him to a mingled emotion. He could not but be thankful that his future years, brief as they might be, would be freed from the *atræ curæ* of reliance on precarious literary labours ; but his heart ached that this good news had not come earlier. A reluctant consent had been wrung from him to Gladys's marriage, principally because he knew that the state of his health might any day leave her without a protector, and that he had not means to bequeath to her any ease or elegance of life. This knowledge had made him conscious that he had no right to stand between his daughter and the brilliant and secure position offered to her, from mere romantic apprehensions which

the future might never realise. But if this little fortune had come to him before the visit of Guilderoy, he would not have hesitated to place the test of long probation betwixt him and his desires. Alas! when fortune stretches out full hands, it is so often too late for her gifts to be of much use. Still he was thankful as he sat in the pale sunshine amidst the honeysuckle and sweetbriar of his cottage porch.

He loved learning with all a scholar's tender and delicate devotion, and it had often seemed to him almost a prostitution of it to turn his command of its treasures into a means of making money. A sentimentality the world would have called it, as it always calls so every better emotion in us.

As he sat thus he heard the rapid trot of horses' feet coming up the sandy lane, sunk low between high flowering hedges and banks which were in spring purple with violets.

Some one from Ladysrood,' he thought.

Ladysrood had become full of guests, and Vernon never consented to go there when there was a house party; he pleaded utter disuse of society, and distaste for it; and, indeed, few of the associates of Guilderoy had much in common with him. And he had an unchangeable resolution never to give any human being the right to say that he had gratified his own ambition, and secured his own interests, by his daughter's alliance.

'Why should you persist in remaining so aloof from us?' Guilderoy had said to him that same morning, and Vernon replied:

'Why should I renew acquaintance with the great world when it and I have been strangers so long? My life must seem to you like that of a snail or a mollusc, fastened under a cabbage-leaf or a ribbon weed. But it is a contented one. Can you say as much for yours?'

Guilderoy was at a loss what to answer.

'You are the only contented person I have ever met,' he said evasively.

'I am content because I have done with expectation,' replied Vernon. 'What is discontent? Only desires which are incapable of fulfilment. I quite understand that the whole tenour of modern life inevitably produces it; that is why I live chiefly with the dead.'

'A waste of your great intelligence, and a deprivation to those who appreciate your society,' said Guilderoy.

'My dear Evelyn,' said Vernon, 'I am not vain enough to believe in your flattery. Whatever my intelligence may be worth I can put on paper, and if any really care for my society they can come to Christ'slea—as you come.'

Guilderoy coloured a little. He was sensible that he came



but seldom there. And yet he had great affection and admiration for John Vernou.

'It is a very great pity that he remains such a recluse,' he said once to Aubrey, who replied: 'You think my life distressingly wasted on the country. You think Vernou's distressingly wasted on solitude. He and I think yours distressingly wasted on pleasure. Which of the three of us is most right?'

'Probably we are all three extremely unwise to judge of, and for, others.'

'That may very well be. Possibly, too, all life is more or less wasted because men, with all their studies, have never studied the secret of truly enjoying it. Possibly, too, Vernou in his hermitage is nearer doing so than either you or I.'

But though he had never gone thither, those of the guests of Ladysrood who had learning enough to appreciate it often sought his society, and the little cottage under the apple orchards had become a sort of intellectual Delphos to those men of genius and learning who were numbered amongst Guilderoy's friends. It was no one of these now, but Hilda Sunbury who lifted the latch of the little wooden gate and came under the wild rose boughs to him.

Having begun by hating him as an adventurer and an eccentric solitary, she had ended in admiring him and esteeming him. 'The only really sensible man I ever met,' she often averred.

Vernou, on his part, liked her; he appreciated her strong attachments and her strong common sense which yet so denied her those true charms, sympathy and the power of silence. She had now driven over alone, ostensibly to consult him about one of her sons, but in reality for another purpose. When she had spoken of her son, of politics, and of the weather, she hesitated a moment, and then said:

'Mr. Vernou, you and I have one common object and desire—the happiness of my brother and your daughter.'

'Certainly, my dear lady,' replied Vernou; 'but if you mean that either you or I can do anything except wishing for it, you are greatly mistaken. I have told you so very often.'

'A word in season surely—'

'Ah, no! It is just those words which are always most aggravating! I am sure you have some bad news for me. Spare me and tell it quickly.'

'I ought not to tell you at all. But you have heard of the Duchess Soria?'

'Never.'

She gave him the outlines of the Duchess Soria's past so far as it had been connected with her brother, and Vernou heard with impatience.

'It was broken off before his marriage, no doubt,' he said.  
'Why rake amongst dead leaves?'

'Because leaves grow again.'

'You mean——?'

'That Evelyn is more in love with this woman than he ever was before, and that she comes to Ladysrood to-morrow. Now what I wish to know is, shall you or I tell your daughter?'

Vernon heard with infinite pain.

'I knew how it would be,' he murmured. 'But I confess it is sooner than even I thought. My child is worth more than that. Perhaps you mistake.'

'I never mistake,' she replied, with hauteur; 'and if I sacrifice the reputation of my brother to you, it is out of sincere regard for your daughter.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Whatever you deem best. She must certainly not be left to remain in ignorance to receive Beatrice Soria——'

Vernon sighed.

'Dear madam, it is only ignorance—unless most wondrous and perfect patience—which enables any woman to endure her married life at all.'

'You mean, then, you would leave her in ignorance?'

'Yes. What good could knowledge do if it be as you think?'

'Good heavens! Surely there is such a thing as self-respect?'

'Yes; my child will always have self-respect, for she will never, I am convinced, do anything to lose the respect of others. Self-respect does not consist in making violent scenes, or ill-judged reproaches, or discoveries which are for ever fatal to peace.'

'You take the insult to your daughter strangely quietly.'

'I have known the world in my time, my dear madam, and I read your brother's character before he had been ten minutes in my study; it is not a character from which any woman can expect constancy. I thought, however, that he was a gentleman; if he is as insincere and as unscrupulous as you describe he is not one.'

'Not a gentleman!'

Lady Sunbury flushed crimson, and rose in bitter anger.

'Not if what you tell me is true.'

'I did not tell you that he might be abused, but argued with; and that your daughter might be warned and counselled.'

John Vernon sighed wearily.

'Dear Lady Sunbury, you and I both spent all our intelligence in warnings and in counsels before this marriage took

place. Action, now that it has taken place, would be worse than useless.'

'My intentions are misunderstood,' said his visitor coldly. 'All my inclinations would, of course, lie towards screening and excusing my brother. But I thank God that I have never allowed mere inclination to be the guide of my conduct. I believe in duty, though I know the world of our day ridicules and despises me, and my sense of duty made me feel that I could not allow my sister-in-law ignorantly to receive her most formidable rival.'

'I thank you for your feeling for Gladys,' said Vernon with emotion. 'But neither you nor I should do any good in lifting the band off her eyes; it will fall enough of itself. Besides — pardon me — you cannot tell that Guilderoy's feelings have revived for this lady. He cannot have told you, I presume?'

'He has not told me, certainly. But I have always taken means to be aware of my brother's actions, and I know that all relations are renewed between him and the Duchess Soria.'

Vernon covered his eyes from the sun with one hand. The calm sweet light and the gay song of the mavis in the adjacent orchard hurt him.

'It is very sad if true,' he said at last. 'But interference were worse than useless. It would only confirm your brother in his infidelity, and inspire in my daughter a resentment which she could never forget. Dear madam, believe me, marriage is a difficult thing. But, as law stands, we cannot undo one once contracted without publicity, comment, interrogation, every indignity which it is most frightful for either a proud or a delicate nature to provoke. What then remains? Only to leave such peace as there is in it undisturbed as long as we can. I know that you believe in the advantages of interference. I do not. When we are sure to do any possible good by it, it is a dangerous meddling with fates not our own. When we cannot even be sure of so much as that, we certainly cannot dare to attempt anything. Your brother's wish for my daughter's hand was, as you know, most unwelcome to me, because I knew that he had not the stability, nor she the experience, to make happiness between them possible. But, since, unhappily she is his wife, she shall not, I promise you, whilst I live, allow either passion or injury to fling his name to the howling calumnies and cruelties of the world; not whilst I live.'

There was a great sadness in the three last words, and he sighed as he said them.

'When I am gone, be kind to her,' he added.

'Where are you going?'

'Where we must all go.'

Hilda Sunbury looked at him in surprise and wonder.

‘Why should you speak so? You are as likely to live as she or I. You are in the full vigour and flower of your intellect.’

John Vernon smiled.

‘Of my intellect, perhaps; but, unhappily, living is a physical question, and when the body succumbs the light of the mind goes out too. I have always thought it the greatest argument for the immortality of the soul, for it is really ridiculous to suppose that the hemlock could really destroy such a mind as Socrates, or that the genius which created Ariel and Caliban can have been killed for ever because Warwickshire leeches in the Elizabethan days were fools. Plato, indeed—’

Lady Sunbury rose in evident irritation. ‘Socrates and Plato! Good heavens, Mr. Vernon, how can you possibly think of such people when I have just told you, at the greatest pain to myself, and perhaps even disloyalty to my brother, of what wrong is being done to your only child!’

‘My dear madam,’ said Vernon wearily, ‘if my child ultimately succeeds in keeping the honour of your brother’s name intact, and bearing her own pain and dishonour in silence, she will owe it to that which I have told her in childhood of those two dear dead friends of mine. Perhaps you have never read the “Apology” or the “Crito”? Horace has said that a new amphora keeps long the odour of the first wine poured in it; and as it is with the earthen vase, so is it with the human mind in youth.’

Lady Sunbury left the garden of Christlsca with offence.

She reflected that it was always wholly useless to look for practical wisdom from the students of books.

She had been born with an ungovernable love of interference with the affairs of others. She believed so conscientiously in the excellence of her intentions, that she was sincerely ignorant of the curiosity, love of authority, and many another personal motive, which were continually moving her to interfere to govern the destinies and to correct the errors of others. Her detestation of the Duchess Soria had been to the full as potent in her present action as her anger with Guilderoy and her indignation for the wrongs of his wife. Like many another woman of energy and exclusive attachments, she could not resist the feeling that she had been appointed by Providence to watch over, and save from themselves, all those who belonged to her; and though this view of her mission had never yet had any other result than to alienate and weary those whom she desired to serve, and frequently to hasten their descent down that path which she sought to prevent them from ever following, yet she never could so alter her nature as to refrain from making the attempt. Her husband hated, her sons feared, and her brother often avoided her in consequence, but no power on

earth would ever have persuaded her that her failure to influence them arose from her own fault. Alas! most people carry about with them a lanthorn like Diogenes, but they are for ever flashing its rays into the faces and the souls of others; they do not remember to turn its light inward.

Lady Sunbury indeed knew—no one better—that a woman can no more restrain a man from inconstancy than she can restrain the breakers of the sea from rolling up on to the shore. She knew, too, by her own experience, that rebuke, reproach, expostulation, publicity, only increase the evils against which they passionately protest. But she did not choose to remember anything of what she knew. She was only ready to blame her brother's wife for too passive acquiescence, as she would have blamed her had she had recourse to any violent indignation. She could not pardon her for having gained no influence over Guilderoy, even as she would never have forgiven her had she succeeded in gaining any. She knew that her sister-in-law was unhappy, and that such unhappiness was at her age perilous in every kind of way; but yet she was rather impatient of her and critical of her than compassionate. If she were not a simpleton she was wicked, quite wicked, not to take such measures as would save her husband from unfaithfulness and herself from sorrow.

And she, who had forgotten the saying that 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread,' or else never imagined by any possibility that she could be classed with fools, drove rapidly home to Ladysrood, where a large party was staying as well as herself. 'It will be very difficult to see her alone,' she thought, 'but I will try.'

As it chanced, Guilderoy was out riding with several of his friends; the remainder of the guests were sitting, sauntering, or playing afternoon games in the west gardens. There was a large table spread under one of the great chestnuts, where servants were serving tea, ices, fruits, wines, strawberries and cream, everything that was wished for or imagined. Gladys was performing that part of mistress of a great house which had now become second nature to her, but which never ceased to oppress and fatigue her with its tedium.

Society, like all other pursuits of life, requires to have an object in it to be interesting. She had no object; it did not seem to her that anything of interest could possibly arise in her life. She had pain in it, and a jealousy for which she condemned herself, but these had both become so familiar by habit that she had ceased to expect ever to be free from them. Her want of interest in what went on around her gave her a listless air, which all her really sincere efforts to be kind and courteous could not repair. People felt that they were indifferent to her,

that they bored her, that she would have preferred their absence to their presence, and there were many whose vanity made them bitterly resent this. She was moving now from one group to another, doing her best to be amused by what so greatly amused everyone else, and failing entirely to be so. She wore a Gainsborough hat, with long feathers drooping to her shoulders; she had on a white frock of very soft embroidered gauze tissue, and a great sash of broad pale-blue ribbon was fastened at the side.

'She is really a lovely creature,' thought her sister-in-law; 'how wild he would be about her were she only some one else's wife!'

Lady Sunbury joined the groups under the chestnuts and bided her time. It was still early. There was a great deal of laughter and flirtation and general diversion, the air was balmy, and the gardens delightful. Some one asked if they might dance, the lawn was so smooth; the lady of Ladysrood assented; the musicians, who were always in the house, were sent for, and stationed where they were not seen behind thickets of rhododendron; the people began to dance.

Gladys and Lady Sunbury were left almost alone.

'How strange that they can care for *that*!' said the former, with dreamy contempt, as she watched the valsers moving round.

'How I wished you cared for it, my dear!' said Lady Sunbury. 'How I wish you cared for anything.'

'Do you?' Gladys looked suddenly at her with a strange expression in her eyes.

'Certainly I do,' said her sister-in-law. 'You would be so much happier if you were—were—interested in what goes on around you.'

'I am very often interested; I am not often pleased.'

'What does she mean?' thought Lady Sunbury.

'I wanted to say something to you for a moment in private. Could we go a little apart, do you think? They are all dancing.'

'Oh yes. They will not miss me.'

She moved away from the gaiety of the scene into a walk known as the King's Alley, because Charles Stuart had paced up and down it in the dark days between Oxford and Whitehall. It was a green walk enclosed on either side with tall walls of clipped yew, above which stretched and met the boughs of massive beeches. It was sequestered and out of earshot, though the music of the waltz came to them on the air as they paced down it.

'You care for your father?' said Lady Sunbury.

'Ah!' It was an ejaculation rather than a word, but the

whole love of a lifetime was in it. 'It is no ill of him you want to say, is it?'

'Oh no,' said her sister-in-law. 'I went to see him this afternoon. I wanted him to tell you something which must be told you. But he refused.'

'Be sure that it should not be told at all, then,' said Gladys coldly.

'Mr. Vernon is not infallible,' replied Hilda Sunbury, growing angered. 'I consider that it should be told, and I am the best judge of what is or is not for the honour of my family. I do not wish you to receive the Duchess Soria.'

Gladys stood still and looked at her.

'Why?' she asked.

'Because—because my brother was her friend—more than her friend—before his marriage.'

'My dear Lady Sunbury,' said her brother's wife very calmly, 'if I am to decline to know all the women whom your brother honoured in that manner, I shall have to make great excisions in my visiting list.'

'Good heavens! Can you make a jest of it?'

'No; God knows that is farthest from my thoughts. But the world would make a jest of him if I acted on your advice.'

'Do you mean to say that you were aware of what his relations were with Beatrice Soria? and what they have again become?'

Gladys grew very pale.

'I knew there was something—some one—it does not matter who—it is not the first time.'

Her voice was faint with pain, but her face was calm.

'Are you sure that it is Mme. Soria?' she asked after a moment's pause.

'Perfectly sure. You cannot let her come here; you must make Evelyn understand that. I speak as I do for your honour and his.'

'Or for our estrangement,' thought Gladys bitterly.

'My father said I was not to be told this?' she inquired.

'Yes; he said it could do no good. He did not appreciate my motives, my sense of duty.'

'Neither do I,' said Gladys abruptly; and she began to walk on under the beechen shadows.

'I am sorry that you do not,' said Lady Sunbury sternly. 'You are nothing to me, and my brother is much. But I could not see a wrong done to you under your own roof while I could save you from it by a word of warning. It was useless to speak to Guilderoy; he is self-willed, careless, obdurate, where his fancies are involved. I deemed it best to put you on your guard. If you tell him you refuse to receive the Duchess Soria

he will be compelled to acquiesce, and he will not ask your reasons and he will be saved from the world's condemnation.'

Gladys said nothing in answer. She continued to pace the alley with agitated, quickened steps.

'Have you a personal dislike to Mme. Sorìà?' she asked abruptly.

'That is a very unworthy insinuation,' replied her sister-in-law with hauteur. 'This much I will say of her—she is the only woman on earth who ever really influenced my brother. You must be aware that you yourself have no more influence over him than if you were a statue; of course I do not know whether that is his fault or yours.'

Each one of the words went to the heart of the hearer as if it had been a stab with a knife. Had it been her fault? Her father also had seemed to think so. Her sister-in-law evidently thought so. What did women do to retain the passion and elicit the confidence of men? She could not tell. Who could put in her possession the secret of that marvellous talisman? She turned to her companion with composure, though her lips were very pale:

'I have no doubt you mean well, though you might find it hard work to persuade Lord Guilderoy that you do so. Mme. Sorìà does not come for three days. In the morning I will go to Christlea and consult my father.'

'Your father will certainly counsel you to keep the rôle of Griseldis,' said Lady Sunbury with ill-repressed rage and violence.

Gladys' face flushed painfully.

'If I do keep it,' she said with bitterness, 'it is certainly the members of your house who should be grateful to me.'

Then she walked with quick firm steps away from her sister-in-law, out of the shade of the beech-alley, and towards the dancers in the sunlight on the lawn.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

JOHN VERNON, having accompanied his visitor to her carriage, had walked slowly back to his little house. He had felt infinitely more emotion than he had shown to her, for although not unexpected, the tidings she had brought to him had been none the less cruel. And he felt, as he had said to her, that all intervention would be useless, worse than useless. When two lives are drifting apart, their own regrets or relentings can



yet unite them, but the interference of any other can only send them wider asunder.

He sat down again in his willow chair, with the sunshine about him and the bees buzzing in the honeysuckles. His left hand was still closed unconsciously on the letter from his dead cousin's lawyers. The emotions of pleasure and pain had exhausted him; they were the perils against which he had always been warned. His tranquil life amongst his books had alone preserved so long his fragile cord of life.

As he looked at the gay sunshine with the gnats and flies dancing in it, the tangle of green boughs through which the blue of the sea was shining, the fragrant sweetbriar and southernwood where two little blue tomits were flitting, to him there seemed so much—ah, how much!—that was unutterably beautiful in existence. Why would youth and manhood fret themselves away in the fierce and heated furnace of passions which were no sooner attained and enjoyed than they lost all power to charm? If youth would only believe how much else there is to enjoy! If age, which does know, had not lost the power to enjoy all!

'*Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait!*' he murmured, in the old trite true sad words of human existence, which has no sooner time to learn its secret than it has to pass away where there is no more use for its hardly acquired knowledge. What cruelty and mockery there were in this brief saying. If he could only put his own knowledge, his own patience, his own experience into the heart of his child!

He felt tired and sad, and the pleasantness of the little gift of Fortune which had come to him was forgotten in an aching anxiety for the fate of one dearer than himself.

'If she be ever forced to leave him,' he thought, 'she will be too proud to keep her dowry, she will have this to live on; it is well so far.'

The afternoon was very warm and sultry; there was no sound but of the buzzing of the bees and the murmur of the sea on the shore. He listened to that sound, which seemed like the beating of the heart of Nature.

'If we could listen more to that, and less to our own, we should be happier while we live, and readier for death,' he thought, as he leaned his head back in the chair and closed his eyes. He felt very weary. He rested there very quietly.

The hours passed, and the sun sunk down, and the little birds in the sweetbriar and southernwood began to think of their bedtime, safe under their abode of leaves.

The dog at his feet looked anxiously up at him from time to time. The reflection from the setting sun shone on his face, which was very white and very calm, and there, when the

shadows of the evening came about him, his old servant found him sleeping. He had died in his sleep, without a pang. There was the shadow of a smile on his pale lips.

He had gone in peace to the great majority, whither had gone before him the great souls whom he had loved in life.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

At Ladysrood the long dinner was over by half an hour; the drawing-rooms were filled with gay groups; there was the sound of pleasant laughter and of sweet voices, and of the beautiful melody of Wagner's Spinning Chorus, which was scarcely listened to or heeded by anyone. In the midst of that soft animation and polished mirth, the groom of the chambers, bending low to his master, murmured an almost inaudible word; Guilderoy grew very pale, and with a hurried phrase of apology, left his guests. In the library he found the old gardener of Christslea, who had come thither to tell him that John Vernon was dead.

'God forgive me!' was his first thought. 'Will *he* ever forgive me if he be gone where he can know all?'

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

'My child, you and I have lost the best friend we had on earth. Let us endeavour to live together as he would most have wished us to do,' said Guilderoy with sincere emotion, when he had left all that was mortal of John Vernon in the little graveyard by the sea at Christslea.

She sighed; she did not respond.

The party at Ladysrood had of course been broken up immediately, and there was no question for the moment of the arrival of the Duchess Soria. Of the personal impatience which he felt at this disappointment to himself, Guilderoy gave no sign to his wife. He was sincerely sorry for her, and he forbore from any kind of word or hint which could have added to her sorrow. He was for the first time in his life wholly unselfish. But the consciousness that he was doing his duty did not prevent the tedium of those solitary days of mourning from weighing

heavily on his spirits, and taxing his patience cruelly. He was wholly unused to either the sensation or the spectacle of pain.

In the overwhelming shock and grief to her of her father's death, all other memories and feelings had been for the time forgotten or thrust aside. Guilderoy had shown to her in her suffering a genuine tenderness and sympathy which had been wholly unaffected, as he himself bitterly regretted the loss of one whom he had regarded with affection, and whose loss was irreparable he knew to her, perhaps to them both. The cottage at Christslea had been the one temple of peace in which neither of them would ever have been ashamed to confess error and seek reconciliation. But John Vernon was dead, and all that remained to them of him were his books and papers, his written and printed thoughts, and the letter which had been found in his dead hand.

He was moved to greater regret when he read and arranged the innumerable papers which Vernon had left behind him, and felt conscious, at every line, of how much nobility of mind and rich maturity of intellect were quenched for ever under the wild thyme and moss which covered the little burial-place where he lay.

Guilderoy did not share that hope which sustained the souls of Socrates and Plato, and which the soul of John Vernon had drunk in from theirs. To him it seemed that *quand on est mort, c'est pour longtemps*: a time so long that it stretches on to all which mortals can conceive as for ever. And his eyes were often wet with tears as he turned over the manuscripts of his dead friend.

The sincerity of his own sorrow did not diminish the intolerable sense of dreariness with which these late summer weeks at Ladysrood filled him. On the contrary, he became impatient, even of his own regrets; he was so wholly unused to harbour as a guest any thought or emotion which was not pleasurable that he resented his own pain.

These long silent summer hours in this house of mourning, with the figure of Gladys in its long black robes always before him, and no other distraction possible, tried almost beyond endurance the good resolutions which he had silently formed as he looked on the pale serene countenance of Vernon lying in his last sleep on his narrow bed, with the lattice of his chamber open to the blue sky, the twittering birds, the quivering leaves, the murmurous sea.

A man of his temperament is quickly touched to fine issues, to honest regrets, to tender resolves; but there is no power on earth which can secure his adhesion to them.

He showed her the most sincere sympathy in her grief, and

was even perfectly patient with its intensity and long duration. He had felt the truest admiration and attachment on his own part for her father, and had always felt that Vernon would do much to smooth and dissipate any difficulty which might arise between himself and her. The philosophical, indulgent, and temperate influence of such a mind had had a sway over himself which he knew to be the most beneficial he had ever felt. It left a painful void even in his own life to feel that that wise and serene friend had for ever passed out of sight and hearing.

Earlier, ever so little earlier, she would have responded to his efforts; the frost of her heart would have melted under the first sunbeam of a kind word; but now the remembrance of what his sister had told her was ever dominant. It haunted her night and day; guided by its cruel indications, she realised a thousand words and signs which were confirmation true. She recollected that her husband's abandonment of the colonial adventuress had been contemporary with the arrival of the Duchess Soria in England. His desire that she should be invited to Ladysrood; his tone in speaking of her; his preoccupation and visible anxiety for her pleasure and her presence—all these recurred to her memory with overwhelming and indisputable testimony to the truth of Hilda Sunbury's words.

Hilda Sunbury herself had felt a pang very kindred to remorse when she heard where she stood in the brilliant drawing-room of Ladysrood, that Vernon had been found dead after sunset. Perhaps she had hastened his end; she knew that she had distressed him, and there was constantly sounding in her ear his bidding, 'Be kind to her.' Had it been kind to have said what she had said to her brother's wife? Would it not have been well if she had obeyed the dead man's caution and counsel? Her conscience told her that it would; and she was glad to excuse herself to Guilderoy, and hasten from his house on a plea of urgent matters needing her presence at her own home.

She was uneasy at what she had herself done; she was sensible that it had been neither wise nor laudable; that whatever she knew or thought she knew should have been kept in her own breast. But she had been unable to help a restless desire to have her share of influence in the life at Ladysrood, and though she was not conscious of it, unity between her brother and his wife would have been intolerable to her. She had never been able to pardon the manner in which, from the very first hour, so very young a woman as Gladys had passively avoided her efforts at direction and tacitly rejected her suggestions. From the moment she had presented her at Court, she had felt that her brother's wife would yield to her in nothing.

'Then she is all alone in the world henceforward!' said Aubrey, when he heard of John Vernon's death.

'Alone! How can you talk in such a manner?' said Lady Sunbury, greatly annoyed. In herself she blamed her brother endlessly and pitilessly; but she would have resented as the greatest of personal insults a hint from anyone else that he was ever so slightly blamable.

'I know no one more entirely alone,' said Aubrey, very gravely.

'Will you console her solitude?' it was on Lady Sunbury's lips to ask; but the respect she had for her cousin, both as a man and as a statesman, restrained her for once from an unpleasant and imprudent utterance.

'Her father might possibly have restrained her from follies!' she observed instead.

'Is she disposed towards folly?' asked Aubrey. 'I have seen few women so young so wise.'

'You admire all she does!'

'I confess I think she conducts herself, in what are frequently very difficult circumstances, with great tact, and forbearance very unusual in anyone of her years. I think she is far from blind to Evelyn's caprices, but she has the good sense to affect to be so.'

'It is the least she can do in return for all he has done for her.'

'My dear Hilda, what a vulgar sentiment! If he had not married her, men quite as good as he would have done so.'

'Would *you*?' asked Lady Sunbury with her most unpleasant expression and accent.

Aubrey raised his languid eyelids and looked her full in the face.

'If I had happened to meet her—yes,' he replied coldly.

'He is in love with her!' thought his cousin, outraged and disgusted; and she began to meditate as to how far it was possible to give any hint of it to Guilderoy.

In a few weeks the solitude grew unendurable to him. He was wholly unused not to have the voices of the world around him, and the constant sight of a sorrow which he could do nothing to relieve depressed and distressed him beyond endurance. A heartless man would have felt it much less, but Guilderoy was never heartless, though he frequently made the hearts of others ache.

Even a great passion, if he had been capable of it, would have found him after its first ecstasies easily diverted from it by the attractions of minor emotions and of passing interests.

Life had been full of pleasant temptations to him, and he

had never acquired the habit of avoiding these or of keeping steadfastly to any path.

He could do nothing to console her. She abandoned herself to her grief with a forgetfulness of all else which was in its way as selfish as was his desire to get away from the sight of her grief. Her father had been the centre and support of her whole life; she reproached herself passionately with having ever believed that she was unhappy so long as the sweetness and wisdom of his life were with her.

He grew impatient of seclusion and the sight of sorrow. She was too young to be left by herself, and she had no relatives who could be invited to remain with her. Between his sister and herself he knew that little harmony or sympathy existed.

‘If you would come away somewhere it would distract you; there are many countries you have never seen. I will take you where you choose; a voyage might do much to calm you,’ he said to her one morning in the seventh week after Vernon’s death. But she could not be persuaded to leave Ladysrood, and made her daily pilgrimage to the grave at Christslea.

‘I cannot go into the world; do not ask me,’ she said again and again to him. ‘Go you, if you wish.’

‘Remember that you are the first to suggest it,’ he replied.

Not pleased at the permission given him, though longing for the liberty which it awarded, he added with hesitation:

‘The world will think it strange if I leave you so soon.’

‘What does that matter?’ she said, unconsciously repeating Socrates’ question: ‘Is it worth while to think so much of the opinion of others?’

‘I have no wish for my friends to suppose that I am unkind or that you are deserted,’ said Guilderoy, impatiently. ‘You have already, my dear, had a certain manner, a certain air, which have suggested as much to some people. I quite understand how wretched you feel under this irreparable loss, but I have never understood why you always looked so little happy before it. Very few women would quarrel with the life you lead. And if you have any wishes of which I am unaware you have only to name them. They shall be gratified.’

‘You are very good.’

‘That is not the language which you should use to me. It is language ridiculous in the relations we bear to one another. There is no question of goodness. You are my wife, and it is my pleasure as well as my right to give you whatever it may be in my power to give.’

‘Is fidelity in your power?’

She looked him full in the eyes as she spoke. She was

standing before him in the sunshine ; her black gown fell about her in long slim severe folds, her face was pale with long weeping, and there were dark circles under her eyes. There was a look on her face wistful and yet resolute, pathetic and yet stern.

‘Fidelity!’ repeated Guilderoy.

It was a strange inquiry, and one which left him at a loss to answer it. ‘Who has been talking to her?’ he wondered.

She looked at him with the same unchanging gaze, and her eyes tried to read his very soul.

‘Have you been faithful to me?’ she asked. ‘I will believe you if you say that you have.’

‘My dear!’ he was embarrassed and unnerved; he felt his face grow warm; a hot flush rose in his cheeks, his eyes avoided hers, and he hesitated to reply. ‘Why do you ask such questions?’ he said with petulance. ‘No man ever tells the truth in reply to them.’

‘You have told it to me now,’ said Gladys, coldly; and she said nothing more.

She stood quite still, and looked at him; and he avoided her gaze.

‘And the Duchess Soria!’ she asked. ‘Is it true that you wished me to invite her here, because——’

He interrupted her passionately.

‘Hush! I forbid you to speak her name to me!’

‘Why? Because you have loved her?’

‘Because she is the only woman I have really loved in all my life. God help me!’

There was that sound of true and passionate feeling in his voice which she had never heard from him for herself; such a tone is unmistakable, is irresistible; it carries its own truth and its own secret with it in overwhelming witness to the most unwilling ear.

‘*Vous l’avez voulu!*’ he said with violence. ‘It is always so with women. One spares them—would screen them—would keep them in peace—and they will not be content with that. They will ask and suspect, and prate and irritate, until they are wounded by the very thing they need have never known, but for their own insatiate curiosity, their own restless and unquenching jealousy! It is always so!’

He was passionately angered; angered with himself because he had betrayed a secret which did not only concern himself, and angered with her because she had driven him into one of those positions in which a man must dishonour himself in his own sight, either by falsehood or confession.

‘If you loved her, why did you affect to love me?’ she asked.

Her voice and her attitude were unnaturally calm, but her eyes had a look in them which he did not care to meet.

'I affected nothing!' he answered with entire sincerity. 'I thought I loved you; I thought at least that I loved you enough to be happy with you. They always say the happiest marriages are passionless. I was entirely honest in all I said to you and in all I said to your father. I never told you that I had not loved other women; I never told you that I should not love others. No man can give those pledges if he is sincere in what he says.'

He spoke with force and warmth and perfect truth; whether he were wrong or right in what he said, he believed in his own words, and he intended neither subterfuge nor apology. He honestly regretted the pain which he inflicted, and he was wholly candid in the expressions of his own emotions. They were things which he had long thought, long felt, but which he would never have said to her unless she had forced him to it by injudicious interrogation. He had been willing to keep her in the calm outer courts of courteous intercourse and social conventionalities; if she had forced her way, despite him, into the hidden recesses of his soul, she could not blame him if she found another name the talisman there and not her own.

'I have never intentionally spoken an unkind word to you,' he went on after a moment's silence. 'I have been delighted to gratify all fancies and wishes that you ever expressed, or that I could ever divine. You have not had that pliability and amiability which one looked for from one so young; but I have never uttered a word to any living being which could allow them to imagine that I blamed you. I have given you every outward respect, every possible consideration; if you have not known how, or have not cared, to win my affections and my confidence, I think I am justified in saying that is not more my fault than it is yours. Love cannot be stoned, or bullied, or worried into existence or duration. All women forget that too often.'

He rose and walked impatiently to and fro for a few moments.

She stood quite still in the same attitude; she was very pale, otherwise she betrayed no emotion.

'I regret that you have forced me to say those things,' he said, after a moment's silence. 'They are always painful to the speaker and the hearer alike, and no possible good can ever come from agitating and embittering scenes. Such scenes are the abhorrence of my life. Every man loathes them, and I most of all. In our position no possible good can come from mutual recrimination. Between lovers such disputes may be the resurrection of a buried love. But between people who are bound



together merely by honour, interest, and society, they can only produce the most fatal estrangement. I have wished honestly that you should be happy, and if you are not so, it is as much my misfortune as it is yours. It may be also my fault. I do not say that it is not. But it is a fault of temperament, and not of will.'

He waited for some answer from her, but she said nothing.

She stood with one hand resting on the marble column, and she might have been made herself of marble, so still and so cold she seemed.

He waited a moment more, looked at her in hesitation; then, with a bow, passed and left her. He knew that he had said what could not be effaced from her memory, and what must for ever be like a barrier of ice between them. Yet if even in that moment she had touched his heart or his conscience in any way, if she had shown anything of that warmth and tenderness which are the very life-blood of a woman's love, he would have been ready to meet it so far as his feelings could have been controlled to meet it. He would have been ready to say to her, 'We are both sacrificed to the mistaken laws of the world; let us pity each other and bear with each other, and be friends if we can be nothing more.'

But she had said nothing; and she had kept that attitude of coldness, of disdain, of offence, which had in it neither invitation nor indulgence. She had no compassion because she had no comprehension; and she had been so wholly absorbed in the intensity of her own pain that she had had no knowledge that it might still have been possible to save something from this wreck of all her hopes. When women see the treasure of their lives founder they drown with it. They do not even try to save what they might.

Guilderoy did not seek to explain or to apologise. His conscience was stung, and he was angered with himself for having been betrayed into such embarrassment. What idiots women were! always seeking to know things which made their misery when known, never letting well alone, never accepting the conventional untruths with which any well-bred man is careful to cover his errors, always breaking with rash steps the thin ice which alone separates them from the bottomless waters of suspicion and jealousy!

He paced to and fro the west terrace with anger and a kind of contrition in his thoughts. Why would she ask those home questions? Why would she try to penetrate his very soul with the gaze of her great, luminous, serious eyes? Why could she not take all he gave her, his kindness, his respect, his courtesy, his outward observance, his occasional embraces, and not en-

deavour to probe further into the secrecies of his inner life, and the mysteries of the male passions?

Good heavens! Had she not a life full enough, brilliant enough, envied enough, to occupy her and content her without her requiring his erotic fidelity as though he were some sighing Strephon to her maiden Chloris? Why would women always make themselves wretched by demanding the impossible, and trying to enter the closed chambers of men's follies?

'And I was really willing to endeavour to be to her what Vernon would have wished,' he thought with a sense of injustice done to himself.

Why were women always like that? always rejecting the pearls you brought them because you would not, or could not, give them a roc's egg.

'Marriage is such a totally different thing to what she thinks it,' he said to himself. 'It is a community of interests; a union of externals, a method of continuing the race and of consolidating property; it is not a lifelong worship of Eros with an eternal song of "O! Hymen, Hymenæ!"'

He was incensed, and nursed his fiction of injustice to himself, not to look closer at the injustice to her of which his conscience whispered.

It was the same season of the year, almost the same day of the month, as that on which he had first spoken to his sister of his intention to marry John Vernon's daughter. Good heavens! Why had he given away liberty and peace and independence of action only because a child had had a lovely face, like a picture by Romney, and because he had had vague impressions that he wished his own sons to reign after him at Ladysrood? Into what irrevocable imprisonment had not his senses and his sentimentality hurried him!

But who could ever have supposed that a woman so young, and reared in such rural seclusion, would have had so much penetration, so much prescience, so much worldly wisdom, and such obstinate refusal to be deceived?

'I have always been most careful to show her every outward respect,' he thought; and it seemed to him that she was unreasonable, and he himself harshly treated. He would always have liked her, always have felt affection for her, if she had only been more facile, more pliant, more easily moulded to what he required.

What could it matter to her if his fancies went elsewhere? He could not see that it really mattered anything.

If there were any very great scandal, if he left her openly for anyone, if he insulted her in public by admiration for some actress or some adventuress, then he could have understood that she would have felt wronged, and the world would have been

with her. But as it was, as he had always been careful to do none of these things, he could not admit to himself that she had any injury at all.

He had remained beside her entirely out of sympathy and good feeling, he had honestly desired to regulate their future lives to be in accord and outward harmony, if in no deeper tenderness, and his only reward had been that she had asked him a direct and intolerable question which he had been too honest a gentleman to answer with a lie !

He was profoundly angered, the more profoundly because his inner consciousness was not blameless. If he had loved her, most probably he would have sought her, have thrown himself at her feet, and confessed his infidelities; but it is only men who love very tenderly who are thus repentant, and he had no kind of love for her. The little he had ever had had died out after six months' possession.

As it was he went into his library, wrote her a brief note, and, giving a few orders to his body-servant to follow him, he had his horse brought round and rode over the moors to the nearest railway. His note merely said :

‘MY DEAR GLADYS,—It will be as well for us not to see one another for a little while. You are mistress of yourself and of Ladysrood. I shall probably go to Aix-les-Bains. If you will address to me at the Embassy in Paris, I will tell them to forward my letters, as I am not quite sure whither I may turn my steps. I hope to find you in better health on my return. You cannot doubt my profound sympathy in the loss you have sustained.

‘Ever yours,  
‘EVELYN.’

The note, when he wrote it, seemed to him a masterpiece of courtesy, kindness, dignity, and implied rebuke.

It seemed to her, when she received it, the acme of indifference, negligence, heartlessness, and insult. It was in real truth neither the one nor the other, being the mere announcement of the fact of his departure, with the other fact of his annoyance and offence conveyed through its conventional words.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

At that same hour Guilderoy was alone for a few instants with the Duchess Sorïa in one of the wooded paths of Aix.

He had spent his utmost ingenuity in the effort to obtain an unwitnessed interview with her, and had failed, utterly failed, as he had done in England. The place was filled with her acquaintances, men who were as assiduous as he in devotion to her constantly surrounded her; and she never received him at her own apartments when she had not her friends about her. She desired to give, and succeeded in giving, him the sense that it were easier to uproot the rocks and hills around than to recover any one of the privileges which he had of his act and will forfeited. His assiduity in attendance on her gave rise to many comments amongst the lingering idlers of the autumn season, which he would have resented had he dreamed of them. But he did not even spare a thought to the observation of which he was the subject, and his whole mind was centred in the endeavour to break through the barrier of friendly, but never intimate, association with her: a barrier much more difficult to break through than any estrangement or coldness would have created. Those would have afforded permission for remonstrance or entreaty; the serene courtesy with which she invariably received him relegated him without appeal to the position of a mere acquaintance. It was well-nigh impossible to reproach a woman whom he had forsaken for being sufficiently forgiving and kind to condone such an offence, and yet he would have been less discouraged by the most marked resentment than he was by this placid courtesy. It was not like her disposition as he remembered it; it was not in accordance with anything of her character as he had known it.

Rumour attributed to her the intention of allying herself anew with a Russian of exalted rank, who had followed her to Aix, and who made no secret to the world of his homage; and Guilderoy suffered all the tortures of that impotent jealousy which he had once so carelessly inflicted on her, and had pitied so little in her.

In the perplexity and perturbation of his various emotions, his thoughts seldom went to Ladysrood: when they did so they were mingled with as much of displeasure as of self-reproach. The waywardness of his pride made him consider that his wife owed apology to him and must be the first to approach him. Meanwhile he was glad of that cessation of correspondence

which to her seemed so tragic and so terrible, but to him appeared but of slight moment. His whole intelligence and volition were for the moment absorbed in the effort to compel some revelation of her real thoughts from the Duchess Soria. He was well used to meet on terms of polite indifference women in whose book of life he had written the tenderest pages; to greet with pleasant cordiality those who had parted from him in anguish and tears, or in fury and reproach. But her indifference became to him an hourly increasing torture.

'Why will you always avoid me?' he said to her at last in desperation, finding his opportunity after many days.

'I am not aware that I avoid you,' she answered. 'I received you constantly in London, and I would have come to your house of Ladysrood had not your party been broken up by death; you are unreasonable, my friend.'

'For God's sake, do not banish me to that name!'

'Are you not my friend? Surely you are not my enemy? though perhaps I should be justified if I were yours.'

Guilderoy grew white with anger.

'Do not let us fence in this useless fashion. You must know, you must have seen, that I feel to you now wholly as of old. Nay, I feel more—ten thousand times more!'

'What sheer caprice!'

'Not anyway caprice. It is the entire truth. You, who are so fully aware of your power over men, should be the last to be astonished at it.'

'I am astonished at no human inconsistencies; but I confess that, said by you to me, these things seems rather like insult than like homage.'

'Why?'

'How can you ask me why? You broke off your relations with me with scarcely more consideration than if you had been a *rapin d'atelier* and I a scwing girl, and because regrets assail you now, for the results of your own action, you expect me to be touched by your expressions of them.'

'I did not know my own heart.'

'Nay, I think you knew it well enough; you only obeyed all its most frivolous and faithless instincts. Or, rather, the heart said but very little; it was the passions which were in question.'

'You are wholly unjust.'

She gave a gesture of impatience.

'Men always consider us unjust to them when we fail to deify their weaknesses.'

'You are unjust when you doubt that my feeling for you was, and is, the strongest of my life.'

'The strongest of *your* life, in which nothing is strong,

perhaps,' she said with restrained scorn. 'Why make to me these vain and useless protestations? You took your own way. It is not my fault if it have led you into paths not pleasant to you.'

'If you would only believe in my sincerity and my remorse!'

'Why should I believe in either? You do not seem to me to know what sincerity or any other deep emotion means. You make love to me and you marry another woman. You tire of that other woman and you imagine that you only love me. It is impossible for any woman to attach much importance to your sentiments or to believe that they can be of any steadfastness or duration.'

He was silent; embarrassed by the consciousness of the truth contained in her accusation, and impressed by his impotency to convince her that nevertheless she did him not injustice.

'You have had the only great love of my life,' he said with emotion. 'In a moment of ingratitude and blindness I was false to you. I imagined that I could live without you. I have repented my mistake ever since; I have been punished more than you can know or would believe.'

She interrupted him with impatience.

'Pray do not put any blame on your wife; I admire her exceedingly. You place her in most painful and difficult positions, and for so young a woman she conducts herself in them with great tact and composure. She is essentially high-bred, and I believe that she deserves a better fate than to go unloved through life; possibly she will not go unloved!'

'For Heaven's sake do not speak of her!'

'Why should I not? She has behaved admirably to me; and, as far as I can judge, admirably to you also. I pity her very sincerely. You are incapable of making any woman happy because you are incapable of being true to any.'

'I am true to you! I have always been true to you, except in one mad, ungrateful moment, which I have repented every year of my life ever since!'

She smiled coldly.

'The truth has had many variations! Do you suppose I have been ignorant of all of your distractions? Your wife may have perhaps, but not I.'

He coloured as she spoke.

'They have been mere caprices, mere follies; none have ever touched my heart. That I swear before Heaven!'

'How truly a man's excuse! A man always considers it apology enough for inconstancy if he can declare that his infidelity has been a mere soulless drunkenness of the senses, for

which he ought to blush! Other women may see excuse in such a plea; I do not.'

'I thought you more lenient, more omniscient.'

'You thought me more credulous. You forget that you taught me a lesson which the most credulous of women could not forget if she would.'

'I made the immense, the irrevocable, mistake of putting my heart into my relations with you. The one who does so is always the one who suffers in any relation of that sort. The mistake is rarely mutual.'

He felt a sense of powerlessness which was the acutest pain his life had ever known; how, in the face of his abandonment, could he ever persuade her to believe that he had loved, and did now love, her more than any other woman he had ever known?

'We were so happy once!' he said, with a timidity almost boyish.

It seemed to him an insult to her to recall to her memory joys which had been insufficient to sustain and retain his fidelity.

A profound indignation flushed in the depths of her luminous eyes.

'Spare me that allusion, at least!' she said, with scorn and passion.

She rose from her seat and moved onward. But he stopped her.

'Tell me one thing,' he said with breathless agitation. 'Is it true what they say, that you will accept the hand of the Grand Duke?'

'You have not the smallest figment of title to ask me such a question,' she replied with some anger. 'You have nothing to do with my life, in any way. I do not, however, mind telling you that my experiences of marriage have not been such as to make me inclined to risk another. What could any man give to me that I have not? And I wholly agree with Balzac that marriage is *la plus grande sottise à laquelle l'humanité est sacrifiée*.' I accepted *your* marriage without reproach. I received and visited your wife. I know nothing more that you could possibly await from me. You have certainly lost all possible title to interrogate me on any subject. You have never seemed to understand that you passed on me the deepest affront that any man can pass on any woman.'

'But if you forgave that?'

'Who said that I forgave? Not I. It is your own assumption. I neither chastised nor rebuked it, because to do either would have been beneath me. We leave theatrical scenes to women of the theatres. But between silence and pardon there

are leagues to traverse ; I have never passed them. Probably I never shall.'

With that she left him and approached a group of acquaintances who were playing a round game of cards in the mid-day sunshine under one of the great pines.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ON that same day Lady Sunbury arrived at Ladysrood, unannounced, bringing her youngest daughter with her ; a girl not yet in the world.

'My dear,' she said affectionately, 'I saw in the papers that my brother has gone out of England ; it is unpardonable of him to have left you alone at such a time, so young as you are and the world so unpleasant as it is. I have brought Constance to stay with you, and I will stay myself as long as I can. I suppose Evelyn will not be many weeks away. Where has he gone ?'

Gladys answered her with what composure and apparent carelessness she could.

The presence of her sister-in-law was very painful to her. She could not forget that what Hilda Sunbury had told her in the elm-walk on the day of her father's death had brought about the scene with Guilderoy which had separated them more hopelessly than they had ever been separated before.

Lady Sunbury was at this moment moved by the most excellent motives, and actuated by a sense of self-blame which was almost remorse. It would have been remorse in a character less certain of its own perfections than was hers. She knew that she had pained and distressed John Vernon needlessly in the last hours of his life, and she heard often in memory those farewell words of his, 'Be kind to her.' She was conscious that she had not been kind to her brother's wife. She knew that she had worried, annoyed and wounded her many a time, and that in what she had revealed to her concerning the Duchess Sorïa, she had been mainly instrumental in bringing about what her own penetration suspected to be the cause of Guilderoy's sudden departure from England.

She was an admirably conscientious woman, though like so many conscientious persons she was wholly ignorant that she was often intensely disagreeable, and even at times very dangerous, from the unwise and irritating things which her conscience impelled her to say and to do.



In coming to Ladysrood she was sincerely desirous to put the ægis of her own presence there, and that of her young daughter, between Gladys and the evil comments of the world. It had been inconvenient to her to leave her own great house of Illington at that moment, and to sacrifice many important social engagements; but she had made the sacrifice with the most admirable intentions, and with that great regard for the reputation of the head of her family which Guilderoy had so often, and so hardly, tried. But all the purity and integrity of her intentions could not make her presence otherwise than an intense irritation and oppression to her brother's wife.

All wounded animals long to be alone; and solitude would have been the only possible balm to the wounds of Gladys, stung to the quick as she was by pain, and missing, as she did every hour of her life, the sense of the near presence of her father's wise and gentle influence. The constant sound of Lady Sunbury's voice, reiterating as it did all maxims of worldly wisdom, and shrewd, cold, common sense, became to her a positive torture which intensified all other suffering in her. The presence even of the young girl, who was impatient of the dulness of Ladysrood, and full of all those artificial and worldly longings which fill the breasts of *débutantes*, was an additional trial to her. Sorrow is bad enough at any time to bear; but its bitterness is tenfold when we cannot shut ourselves up with it in peace, but must at every moment listen to a never-ending stream of commonplace remarks, and affect sympathy with commonplace desires and regrets. The curiosity of Lady Sunbury, moreover, was keen; and without descending absolutely to the coarseness of questioning, she endeavoured, by every indirect means in her power, to discover what had passed between Guilderoy and his wife on the subject of Beatrice Soria.

But Gladys told her nothing; and the long, quiet days of the fading summer passed in infinite *ennui* to the guests, and in intolerable weariness of soul to the mistress of Ladysrood. The only peaceful moments which she knew were when she sat alone by the grave of her father on the thyme-grown cliffs above the sea at Christslea.

She felt so utterly alone. Whilst he had lived she had thought herself wretched indeed; but now it seemed to her that no hopeless sorrow could ever have touched her so long as his noble intelligence and wise affection had been there to shield her from her own passions, and console her for their disappointment.

She had not answered the letter which Guilderoy had left for her on the evening of his departure.

At least she had sent no answer. She had written scores of

sheets to him, but had burned them all, dissatisfied with their utter inadequacy to describe her own emotions.

And after all what was there to say? He had married her believing that he would care for her; and he had found himself unable to do so; either from his fault or hers, or neither or both. What matter which? What words could alter that? What reproach could change, or what entreaty could regain, his heart? In truth it had never been hers.

She suffered all the tortures which wring the inmost soul of a woman who loves what has been hers, and knows that all its charm, its senses, its time, its emotions, are given to others, and can never be recalled to her. Men can so easily console themselves for lost passions; even where their hearts ache, their physical pleasures can so easily be gratified by those who do not touch their hearts, that they cannot understand the wholly irreparable loss that the desertion of her lover is to a woman who can only receive happiness through one alone. He can vary his caprices at will; but she, if she loves with all her senses and her soul, believes that she will never find any means to fill up the blank made in her whole life by his abandonment.

To the mind of Lady Sunbury the lot of her sister-in-law still seemed perfectly enviable: a great position, unlimited command of money and the power to do whatever she liked unmolested constituted a fate which to Hilda Sunbury, as to the world, appeared one with which it was hypercriticism and ingratitude indeed not to be content. Well regulated minds, like Lady Sunbury's, cannot conceive why any woman requires more than the tranquil monotony of a blameless life, large houses to rule over, and a purse always filled.

To these excellent minds the senses are sins, the passions are follies, and the *besoin d'aimer* is wholly unmentionable. Such gross things are believed in and alluded to by poets, they know; but they think poets mad, and at all events poets are no rule for women who respect themselves.

This opinion, either insinuated or more fully expressed, was the burden of all Lady Sunbury's conversation during her stay at Ladysrood, at all such times as her daughter was not in her presence. She believed, and many virtuous women believe with her, that virtue is like a nail; only hammer at it often enough and long enough and you must end in driving it into any substance whatever.

She knew the world too well not to know all the temptations and dangers which must surround in it such a woman as Gladys when left alone in the midst of its risks and its seductions; and on these she dwelt, and on the duties of all women to resist them she was so persistently eloquent, that she raised in the breast of her hearer a passionate longing to fling duty to the

winds, and drove her more nearly from patience and self-control than any injury could have done, made her long as she had never longed for that vengeance of which she had begun of late to dream. While every fibre of her heart was aching, and every pulse of her existence seemed throbbing with pain, she had to endure as best she could the platitudes and the stiff sonorous phrases with which her guest proclaimed the all-sufficing beauties of virtue and self-esteem.

'If she would but leave me alone!' she thought; but this is just what women of Lady Sunbury's type never do.

The days and the weeks passed, and she heard nothing directly from Guilderoy, although he wrote to his steward. His sister came and went, but she left Lady Constance there always, and the discontent of the girl, impatient of her exile from the gay gatherings of the autumn parties at Illington, mingled with her premature worldliness and undisguised selfishness, were almost as trying to Gladys in one way as the companionship of the mother in another.

The routine of the tedious days became almost unendurable to her: the monotonous repetition of commonplace observations seemed to her like that torture in which a drop of water was let fall on a prisoner's head every second, until he went mad or died with it.

Lady Sunbury was of too keen an observation not to be well aware of the torment her presence was, but in the cause of duty she never wavered, and she considered it her duty not to leave so young a woman as her brother's wife alone; and she sacrificed herself or her daughter to that conviction with that resolution which made her so trying and so unsympathetic to those whom she benefited.

At such times as Gladys could get away from her, she passed her hours at Christslea, or shut up in the library writing, and then destroying, hundreds of letters to her husband.

Perhaps if all of them could have been sent to him, and he had had the patience to read them, he would have reached more comprehension of her character than he had ever attained. All her aching, wounded, rebellious heart was uttered in them; knowing no other confidant possible she made a confessor of the reams of paper which she spoiled. But she sent nothing of what she wrote. When read over to herself, they all seemed too tender or too violent, to assert too vehemently or to entreat too piteously.

She had great pride in her, and she could not bring herself to send to him anything which looked like an appeal of the affections. He did not care whether she loved him or not. Why should she tell him that she did?

At times she remembered that he had reproached her with

never seeking to win his affections. Was it true that shyness in the first months of her life with him, and pride and jealousy afterwards, had frozen in her warmth which might have won his confidence? She remembered that her father even had charged her with seeming cold.

She was very young still, and she was utterly solitary, and she passed many hours of misery recalling every incident of these past four years, and torturing herself with those vain and cruel wishes which cry out to the past to come back, that we may undo, and unsay, all that has been done and been said in it.

At last she wrote one which satisfied her in so far as it seemed to her to express her sense of indignity and wrong without descending to appeal.

It was worded thus :

‘After what passed between us on the last day that you were here, it is impossible for me to believe, or for you to pretend, that I am in any kind of way necessary to, or desired in, your life. You have told me, in the most undisguised terms, that you regret that I ever had any association with your life whatever. You cannot regret it more than I do. As I ventured to remind you once before, the act was yours, not mine. The only way in which the mistake of it can be in any measure rectified is for me to leave you. The little fortune which was left to my father on the day of his death is mine, and is more than enough for all my wants. I only await your permission, which I cannot believe will be refused, to leave Ladysrood, and seek some solitude, where under my maiden name I may endeavour to forget that I ever had the misfortune to become your wife.’

She read this again and again, scanning it carefully and critically, to make sure that it contained no word which could flatter him, or imply in her any infirmity of purpose, or yearning of affection. Her future was wholly obscure to her; she did not dare to drag consideration of it into the clear light of reason and actuality. All she felt was a violent longing to cease to be his wife in name, since she had never been so in heart, and to eat his bread, and rule his house, and spend his gold no more. Other women might be content with that purely conventional position; she was not: he had made life intolerable to her; let the whole world know that he had done so.

She was no mere meek, blind puppet to gratify him by appearing at his side at Court, and bearing children to his name, whilst all the joys and interests and passions of his life were found elsewhere. No doubt he would prefer that she should be one of those patient, passionless, sightless women who would go through all the ceremonies of society beside him, and leave him free, without the world’s censure, to find pleasure and

sentiment in the arms of others. But she was not one of those—and all that even her father had asked of her was to forbear from avenging desertion by dishonour.

She read the letter again and again, and could find no flaw in it. It asserted only what it was her perfect right to claim.

He could not compel her to stay on in his houses, only that by her presence there he might have more facility for inviting under his roof all those on whom his caprice fastened for the hour.

She signed it 'Gladys Vernon' and sealed the envelope of it with her father's arms.

Then a remembrance came to her of such humiliation, that her white cheeks grew red with the shame of it, where she sat in solitude. She did not know where to address him; she would have to inquire of his land-agent where he was.

As she paused, looking at the undirected envelope, meditating whether, to avoid such confession of ignorance, she should address it to the English Embassy in Paris, and let it take its chance, the groom of the chambers entered the library.

'Lord Aubrey has arrived, my lady,' said the man, 'and asks if you will receive him.'

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

My dear Gladys, I had no time to let you know,' said Aubrey a moment after, 'for I was uncertain myself until last night that I should be able to accept the invitation of your county to their banquet. I have only two hours to spend with you; but that is better than nothing. You look ill, dear. But that is natural. So irreparable a calamity as yours cannot be borne without suffering, which is in itself an illness.'

She was glad to see him; the frank warm sympathy of his words, the grasp of his hands, the sense of his kindly and staunch sincerity were always precious to her. After the platitudes of Hilda Sunbury, they seemed like a fresh sea-wind after the dull close air of some shut chamber. Yet a certain uneasiness which she had never felt before made her constrained and troubled under the searching and earnest gaze of his eyes. She knew that she had done what he would blame; she knew that she had written what he would blame still more.

'It must be a consolation to you to be absorbed in public life?' she said wistfully.

'It takes one out of oneself,' he replied. 'All work does so ; but national work most of all.'

'You have so much to think of,' she said evasively, 'you could not be unhappy.'

Aubrey was silent.

'I have nothing to think of,' she added, 'except my father.'

'Ah, dear ! What did I tell you ? There is no irremediable sorrow except death.'

They were alone in the gardens into which they had strolled. Lady Sunbury was away for a few days, the girl had gone out riding on the moors ; there had been rain in the morning, but the early afternoon was fine though sunless. There was the warm glow of autumnal flowers everywhere.

'Why is Evelyn away ?' he asked. 'Have you done that which I besought you not to do ? I hoped to find you drawn nearer to him. He was sincerely afflicted at the loss you sustained.'

'Yes. He was fond of my father.'

Her voice trembled ; the tears rose to her eyes.

'Well, surely that common sorrow should have united you ?'

'He does not even write to me !' she said with indignation. 'He only writes to Ward and Brunton.'

They were his land-agent and his house-steward.

'He probably does not know what to say to you,' replied Aubrey. 'When men are in false positions they generally avoid writing. We are all moral cowards, I assure you. He is not more so than the rest of us. We dislike to give pain, and our dislike to doing so usually brings about more pain in the end than if we had frankly grasped the truth at the first.'

'He is your cousin ; it is natural that you should take his part.'

'I have not deserved that rebuke from you, Gladys.'

There was the scent of wet grass and fallen leaves, and the sound of the fountains came through the perfect silence, monotonous and melodious.

'Did you ever lose anyone you loved greatly ?' she asked him.

'Yes,' he replied. 'I lost one whom I loved immensely ; yet for whose loss I was thankful, since her life would have been a greater torture to me than her death was.'

'That must have been terrible ?'

'There is nothing so terrible.'

She did not ask more. She was absorbed in that selfishness which is begotten in the most generous natures by the suffering of the affections. She could not rouse herself from it to enter into the life of another. Aubrey saw that her thoughts were not

with him, and the impulse of confidence which had momentarily moved him was checked.

‘Did you know that he loved the Duchess Sorìa?’ she asked abruptly. The question troubled and embarrassed her companion; he answered with hesitation:

‘Who could be infamous enough to tell you that? It was before his marriage.’

‘It might be before. But he loves her still now; he has never really loved any other woman; he has told me so.’

‘*A boutade*,’ said Aubrey angrily. ‘One of his innumerable *boutades*. He is like Horace’s wayward child:

Porrigis irato puero quum poma, recusat :  
Sume, catelle ; negat : si non des, optat. ,

‘That is why he adores her; she is withdrawn from him. I have never found the fruit that he would court, given or withdrawn,’ said Gladys bitterly.

She was thinking of her husband’s easy acquiescence in her own withdrawal from him.

‘Pardon me, dear,’ said Aubrey tenderly; ‘but I think you have never endeavoured to understand his character enough to soothe or influence him. You have loved him no doubt; but you have given to your love that *âpre* and exacting complexion which alienates any man, and, most of all, a man as self-indulgent and as universally caressed as he. Forgive me if I seem to blame you. I know he has made life difficult for you.’

‘Will you read what I have written to him?’

She took a letter from her pocket, and held it out to him.

‘I have written many others and destroyed them. They seemed too insolent. Read this!’

It was the letter which she had written that morning.

Aubrey sat down on a bench under one of the cedars, and read it. She could tell nothing from the expression of his countenance. He folded it up, and gave it back to her.

‘If your father were living, he would not let you send it.’

She coloured; she knew that already.

‘To send it will be to sever your life for ever from Guilderoy’s. Anger is a bad counsellor. You will live on the excitation of anger for a few months; it is like a drug; it supplies all the natural forces of life for a time only to leave them utterly prostrate when its effects have passed. You are just now in that state of intense pain and violent indignation in which a woman has before now murdered the man who loved and wronged her. But when the heat and wrath of this hour pass, as they will pass, you will regret it to the last day of your life if, of your

own will and accord, you break the bonds of your affections, and make it utterly impossible for them ever to be reunited.'

She was silent. She was seated beside him on the bench. Her head was turned away, but he could see her emotion in the strong throbbing of the vein of her throat.

'You write and you speak,' continued Aubrey, 'as if he had left you for ever; he has intimated no intention whatever of doing so; he has gone away for a few weeks as he has often done before, and you have then thought nothing of it. When he returns, receive him as usual. Be sure that he will appreciate your forbearance and your kindness. Men often seem ungrateful, but I do not think they are often so for real tenderness.'

'Receive him when he comes from her!'

'From "her" or any other "her." Why do you take for granted that he is now the lover of the Duchess Soria? Myself, I do not believe that he is. She is a very proud woman, and his rupture with her was public and sudden; the kind of offence which a proud woman never forgives; for she had done nothing to bring it about or to merit it.'

'And I am to be grateful if she now refuses his homage!'

'You are perverse, my dear,' said Aubrey, sadly. 'I do not tell you to be grateful; I tell you to be generous. They are very different things. And at the risk of wounding you, Gladys, I must confess that what you feel now is much more irritated self-love, than it is love at all.'

She rose impetuously, and walked with quick, uneven steps to and fro upon the grass; her sombre dress enhanced the fairness of her face, the golden glow of her hair, the darkness of her eyes and lashes, as the full light poured down on her through the branches of the trees. She did not look a woman to share the fate of Ariadne. Aubrey looked at her and his vision was troubled, and his calm wisdom and unselfishness were disturbed in their balance. Did his cousin deserve that he should plead thus for him? Did the wanderer, who shunned no Ogygia wherein white arms beckoned to him, merit so much fidelity, so much forbearance?

And yet she loved him. What hope was there for her except in such patience and such pardon as might in time bring her reward?

'May I tear the letter up?' he asked her.

'If you wish,' she said, reluctantly.

'And will you promise me not to write any other like it?'

'I cannot promise that.'

'And yet, dear, I ask the promise more for your sake than his. If you leave him you can wound his pride certainly, and humble him before the world; but that will be all, for he will



sæk and find consolation. But if you, of your own act, sever the tie which unites you, you will be for ever miserable, for you will never forgive yourself.'

She was silent ; her eyes watched the shadows of the leaves swaying upon the grass ; she was unconvinced, angered, mortified, almost sullen. It seemed to her that her wrongs were wide as the universe, and no one pitied them.

At that moment Lady Constance ran down the terrace steps coming from her ride ; she was calling uproariously to the dogs who had been with her ; she brought a boisterous rush of youthful energy and spirits : Gladys felt very old beside her.

They were no more alone, and in half-an-hour he had to take leave of her, for his presence was expected that evening at a political banquet in the county town some fifty miles away.

'Promise me, for your father's sake,' he murmured as he bade her adieu.

She sighed, and her mouth trembled, but she did not promise. She looked at the fragments of the torn letter lying on the ground : she knew every phrase of it by heart ; she could write it again in ten minutes.

After he had left her she walked to and fro restlessly and wearily in the grey, soft, autumnal afternoon. The silence was unbroken except now and then by the caw of a rook ; the great façade of the house stretched before her, stately and noble, with the greatness on it of a perished time ; the solemn stillness of the woods and moors enveloped it ; there was that in its very beauty and majesty which hurt her more than any unloveliness would have done. She remembered the day when she had come thither first, with all a child's eager curiosity, a child's ardent imagination. It was not so very long ago in years ; and yet how old she felt !

What was he doing now ?

That was the thought which tortured her every hour of the day and night. In absence and uncertainty, distance seems to grow up like the wall of a great prison between us and the one whose face we cannot see, whose voice we cannot hear, and whose time and whose thoughts are given we know not where, only are not, we do know, given to us.

She was jealous of other women—of any woman, of all women—with a passionate physical jealousy which was intolerable pain and as intolerable an humiliation. He had thought her cold because the first few weeks of his early love for her had left with her such ineffable, such undying, remembrance, that the mere caresses of habit were unendurable to her after them. She knew all that ecstasy, ardour, and the might of a master passion, could give ; and she had been utterly unable to resign herself to the mere occasional formality of a joyless embrace.

With all the intensity of life in her which youth, and strength and perfect health could give to her, she had been utterly unable to endure that passionless position of the mere possible mother of his children, to which he had relegated her. It was because such warmth and force of passion were in her that she had seemed passionless to him, because she had refused to take from habit what love denied to her. And now all that passion in her felt was the most cruel, the most torturing, of all pain ; the pain of a totally impotent jealousy ; a jealousy which hides itself from public eyes, from pride, but makes wretched every single thought of the brain and impulse of the heart, robs night of sleep, and renders daylight hateful.

Men are intolerant of the jealousy of women, but they might be more indulgent to it than they are if they remembered its excuse. Stendahl has justly said that the pain of jealousy is so intolerable to a woman because it is so wholly impossible for her to follow in absence the life of the man she loves, so wholly impossible for her to measure his sincerity, or to be sure of his truth in any way. The man can watch the woman, can test her in a thousand ways, can haunt her steps and prove her fidelity ; but she can do nothing of this in return. If he chose to lie to her she must be deceived ; and the more loyal, the more delicate, the more generous her nature, the more are all means of learning the truth of his words and the facts of his actions forbidden to her.

*'Toujours les délicats souffrent !'* And this is as true of love as of life.

## CHAPTER XL.

THE afternoon was growing dark, and the low red sun was glowing behind dark clouds as she turned to ascend the terrace steps.

The young Constance was sitting disconsolately all alone with the dogs about her.

'I am afraid you are very dull here,' said Gladys, as she saw the girl's attitude.

'It is as dull as death !' said the girl pettishly.

Gladys' face changed, and the look of momentary sympathy passed out of it.

'I will beg your mother to let you go home,' she answered. 'It is very painful to me to feel you are here against your will, and I shall do perfectly well alone.'

'Why do you not go abroad?' asked the girl. 'You might enjoy yourself endlessly. Oh, I know you are in mourning just now; but it was just the same when you were not. You never enjoyed anything.'

'Perhaps not,' said Gladys, thinking of the days when she had enjoyed every hour of her existence, on the moors and by the sea, when to feel her boat bound with the tide, and hear the lark sing above the gaze, and watch a nest of young chaffinches in the orchard boughs, or the play of young rabbits on the moorland turf, had been happiness enough for her—such simple, natural, country-born happiness as this girl had never known.

'He is enjoying himself; why should not you? Nobody wears deep mourning long now, and nobody makes any difference for it while they do,' said Lady Constance, holding up one of the newspapers which lay in her lap, and pointing with her finger to a paragraph in one of them.

Gladys looked involuntarily where she pointed. It was a description of an autumnal party then assembled at one of the great châteaux of France; and amongst the names of the guests were printed those of Guilderoy and the Duchess Soria.

'Always those journals!' said Gladys, as she motioned it aside in disgust.

'They are very indiscreet, sometimes,' said the girl cruelly, with a malicious smile.

Gladys said nothing, but passed by her tormentor and went indoors.

'What a fool she is to care!' thought Lady Constance.

In the morning very early a mounted messenger brought a letter from Aubrey, which he had written over night before leaving the town.

'It is impossible for me to see you yet again, my dear Gladys,' he wrote, 'though I will endeavour to do so next month. Meanwhile I once more entreat you to do nothing rashly. The only possible consolation for us in sorrow is when we are able to feel that we have done nothing to deserve or hasten it. Perfect patience with those we love gives us this solace if it gives us no other. Very likely your wrongs are less grave than you think; but even if they are more so, still do nothing rashly.'

'You have a high sense of honour, and having this you must feel that as you accepted the charge of your husband's good name you must, in honour, do nothing to imperil it. And forgive me, dear, if I add that in all your expressions, whether written or spoken, I found much more of the evidence of a sense of injury than I found of the unselfishness which is the highest note of love.'

'I am a man, as you know, in whose harassed and busied life

neither poetry nor love has any place, but I remember reading, I forget where or how, some lines which have haunted my memory ever since. They are these :

Though you forget,  
No word of mine shall mar your pleasure.  
    Though you forget  
You fill'd my barren life with treasure ;  
You may withdraw the gift you gave,  
You still are queen, I still am slave,  
    Though you forget.

‘ Now it is the heart which says as much as this, even when forsaken, which to my thinking loves ; and no heart which says less than this does love. It may throb with rage, fret with jealousy, smart with pain, but it does not love. What, after all, dear, is any human life that it should exact as its right remembrance from another ?

‘ Whether we have that right or not, we are only either wise or tender when we waive it wholly, and are content to give our devotion without seeking or asking for any recompense whatever. If you give such feeling as this to Evelyn now, some day or other be sure that you will have your reward.

‘ Whether he deserves it or not is wholly beside the question. It is our own life, our own character, which should determine the measure and standard of what we give—not those of the person to whom we give it.

‘ Pardon me this homily, dear, which I write when I am very fatigued, at long after midnight. I endeavour to say to you what I believe your father would say to you if he were now living. Who knows that he may not stand behind me as I write this, though my gross senses cannot perceive his presence ? We know little of life, nothing whatever of death. All things are possible. The only thing which always seems to me utterly impossible is that a great mind can ever die.

‘ I am, affectionately yours,  
‘ FRANCIS.’

## CHAPTER XLI.

THE essay on Friendship, which Aubrey had read one year before, chanced to catch his eye where it lay on one of the library tables at Balfrons a few days after he had left Ladysrood ; and the sight of it suggested to him a course which would

have its drawbacks and its dangers, but which offered to him some chance of being of service to a life which was constantly growing more dear to him, but which, as it did so, awakened all that self-denial which was the strongest quality in his nature.

‘If I love thee what is that to thee?’ he mused. ‘Or to anyone?’

It would be for ever a secret locked in his own breast, for his self-control was a force which had never yet failed him.

It was difficult for him to leave England at that moment, for he was in office, and the drudgery of high place seldom relaxes much even in the months of comparative liberty. But it was possible to get away for a few days without awaking too much comment in that Argus-eyed public which is for ever seeing what does not exist, and the week after he had been at Ladysrood found him at Paris. There he learned that his cousin had ended his visits to French châteaux and had gone to his own palace in Venice. Although, as a rule, he condemned all interference of the kind, and did not even now expect much from it, it still seemed to him that some one should endeavour to recall Guilderoy to his duties, and he saw no one who could do so with any possibility of success unless it were himself. After long and anxious reflection he decided to attempt it.

When he reached Venice, the November day was full of warm and limpid sunshine sparkling on green water, shining marbles, and ruddy canvas. It was towards evening, and Guilderoy was at home; he received his cousin with cordiality, which was more apparent than real, for he felt an uneasy consciousness that Aubrey had not come thither without some especial reason, and some apprehension of its nature moved him.

Aubrey stated, indeed, that he was only there for a few hours and was going to Vienna by way of Udine.

‘I am leaving myself very soon,’ said Guilderoy. ‘I am going southward or I would accompany you.’

‘Southward?’ said Aubrey, and looked him full in the face.

‘Yes,’ replied the other in the tone of a man who is prepared to resent any comment on his statement, and resist any interrogation.

‘Not homeward?’ asked Aubrey.

‘Not at present.’

Aubrey made no further remark, and they dined together, conversing on the political situation in England, and other topics of the hour. After dinner they sat on the balcony which overhung the water above the Rialto bridge; the night was cold but the skies were brilliant with innumerable stars, and a full moon, golden and glorious, shone down on Venice.

Which is life?' thought Aubrey: 'to dream here under the stars in all this amorous stillness, or to have every hour of the day filled as mine is with the pressure of public business and the conflict of men's tongues?'

But he did not say this; he said instead:

'You have never asked me if I have seen your wife.'

'I am sure that you have, without asking,' said Guilderoy, almost insolently, for he was extremely angered at what he foresaw that he was about to hear. Aubrey passed over the tone and the words.

'I was reading again your essay on Friendship, at Balfrons the other day,' he said instead. 'It is very clever and entirely true. But one thing seemed to me very odd as I read it.'

'That I should have written it at all, I should think,' said Guilderoy.

'No; but that all your admirable remarks lead to so little observance of your own rules in your own relationships. One cannot but see that with your wife——'

'What of my wife?' said Guilderoy very angrily. 'She is perpetually making me scenes of upbraiding. I cannot live in them.'

'But you do not even write to her?'

'I do not write, because she offended me very gravely.'

'Did she offend you without warrant?'

'I do not say that, but she began reproaches which would be interminable if one stayed to hear them. She must have complained of me to you, or what would you know?'

'Be thankful if she complain to no one but me, my dear Evelyn. And complaint is not the correct word. I asked about you of course, and she confessed that you had left her in anger and that you did not write to her—and that she could only hear where you were through Brunton or Ward.'

Guilderoy was silent.

'Well,' said Aubrey, with some hesitation, 'do you consider that you render her happy?'

'I do not admit that any person has the right to ask me such a question,' he said with increasing anger.

'I told you I had left my good manners outside the door, as one leaves one's slippers in Persia,' said Aubrey. 'As I have intruded so far without them, I will come a step farther. I am conscious of my rashness, but we were children together, and I will risk offending you. Do you consider that you have done what you could have done to keep the promises you made to John Vernon?'

Guilderoy moved impatiently. 'What did Vernon ever tell you?'

'He never told me anything. But I am quite sure that you

must have promised him infinite consideration for his daughter, or he would never have given her to you. He was not a man to care for rank and fortune.'

'And what would you imply?' asked Guilderoy with great hauteur.

'It is not my habit to imply,' said Aubrey coldly. 'I always say what I mean; and say it as clearly as I can. I mean and I say now, that Vernon would never have given you his daughter if he had foreseen that you would be as inconstant to her as you are.'

'I do not consider,' said Guilderoy, with great difficulty controlling his anger, 'that even our relationship warrants you in such intrusion on my private affairs.'

'Oh, I have said I have left good manners outside the door for the moment,' said Aubrey indifferently. 'There come times in life when one must choose between being discourteous or being cowardly, and in that dilemma I always choose the former as the lesser fault. I must venture to remind you, if you have forgotten it, that to leave so young a woman as Gladys all alone is to expose her to a thousand perils.'

Guilderoy reddened slightly, partly with anger, partly with the consciousness that his cousin was right.

'She is very cold, and she is very proud,' he said impatiently. 'Such women are their own protectors.'

'A convenient theory, but not a true one: *Nil Helena peccat* may be fairly said of any woman who is left alone.'

'Are you inclined to act the part of Paris?' said Guilderoy with considerable scorn and insolence, which his cousin forced himself not to resent.

'I am as much like Paris as you are like Menelaus,' he said with admirable good temper. 'But you must be aware, whether you choose to admit it or not, that you invite misfortune when you virtually abandon so young and so lovely a woman as your wife.'

'I do not abandon her in any sense of the word,' said Guilderoy. 'She has everything that my position, my respect, my fortune, can bestow on her. I shall never cease to testify to her every possible outward regard. I detest the very smallest exhibition to the world of disunion.'

'But you see nothing injurious in the actual existence of it! My dear Guilderoy, can you seriously think that a mere girl like Gladys, always at heart in love with you and not cold (though you imagine her so because you are yourself cold to her), can be expected to be content with nothing more than the conventional pretence of union? Surely, with your vast experience of the sex, you must know them better than that.'

'I cannot help it! She is not sympathetic to me; it is a calamity, not a crime!'

'No woman whom you had married would have been sympathetic to you for more than three months,' thought Aubrey, but he did not say so aloud.

'Have you come here to read me a homily?' continued Guilderoy with impatience and hauteur.

Aubrey looked at him steadfastly.

'That is beyond my pretensions. I am not your keeper. But I frankly admit that I came here to tell you one thing. I was at Ladysrood for two hours. I found your wife in that state of irritation, suffering, and offence, in which a woman may easily fall at a bound from perfect virtue to utter ruin and self-abandonment. She is young; she does not inherit her father's philosophy; she is profoundly unhappy, and I thought that it was only right that you should be made aware of it, for you seem to think that a woman is like one of your Lelys or Reynolds which hang immovable in your family portrait gallery, though you may only glance at them once in twenty years. My dear Evelyn, you have been the lover of innumerable women; recall all your experiences of the wives of other men; does not all your knowledge tell you that your own wife is now in a position of the greatest peril which a sense of utter loneliness, and the *besoin d'aimer* ungratified, can create for anyone at her dangerous age?'

Guilderoy did not reply; he rose and walked up and down the long balcony with impatience and uneasiness. His intelligence and his conscience both made it impossible for him to deny the force of his cousin's suggestions; and his mind, which was always open to reason even when his passions obscured it, could not but acknowledge the truth of them. A sudden suspicion also flashed across his thoughts.

'You do not mean——' he said abruptly. 'You do not mean that there is anyone——'

'There is no one yet, certainly,' replied Aubrey. 'But how long it may be before that supreme temptation comes to her—who can say? When it does come you cannot blame her. She can with justice say to you, *vous l'avez voulu*. I remind you again: *Nil Helena peccat*.'

Guilderoy was silent.

'I cannot help it,' he said at last, uneasily. 'I do not care for her. One cannot feign that feeling.'

'But why in heaven's name did you marry her?'

'I thought I cared. I did care a little while. How can one account for these emotions? My dear Francis, whatever faults I may have, I am never consciously insincere. If I seem to deceive women it is because I deceive myself.'



‘That I entirely believe. But it is the more hopeless for them. Nor can I sympathise with you in any way. You might have made of her anything you chose if you had taken the trouble.’

Guilderoy was silent.

He was thinking of the days when in the cottage porch at Christlea he had quoted to John Vernon the *et puer est, et nudus Amor*. And how wholly it had been with him as the dead man had predicted!

‘He knew me better than I knew myself,’ he thought. ‘And yet I was quite honest in what I said then, and in what I urged.’

‘Yes,’ said Aubrey, divining the course of his reflections; ‘I believe you are always entirely sincere, though very few people would believe it. But the effect of your changes of feeling is quite as disastrous to others as if you were not. I think your estimate of Gladys is wholly incorrect. I think she would even interest you and attract you if you deigned to occupy yourself with her character. I think she is a woman who would be capable even of making you passionately in love with her, if she had not the irreparable fault of belonging to you. But I have said all that I can possibly claim the right to say—perhaps even more than I ought to have said. I hope, however, that you will pardon me, and think over what I have suggested. I believe that you would never forgive yourself if, through your neglect, any dishonour came upon your home, or even any very great wrong were done to the memory of a dead man who trusted you.’

Then Aubrey rose, bade him good-night, and quitted him.

‘Will it have done any good?’ thought Aubrey doubtfully. ‘At all events, I have done what little I could do for her.’

His own heart was heavy, for his self-imposed mission had not been accomplished without much pain to himself. Far more willingly, had it been possible to do so, would he have struck the man who could be faithless to her; far more willingly would he have espoused her quarrel with the old rude weapons of violence; but to him they were forbidden by his sense of dignity and duty, of position and of patriotism; and even if they had not been so, they would have been of no earthly service to her. He had little hope that anything would be of service. In endeavouring to influence his cousin he felt like a man who tries to make a solid dyke out of the shifting sand. Sometimes the dyke is made, but the sea is always there.

He left his cousin the tormented prey of many conflicting emotions, of which the dominant one was self-reproach, although almost as strong a one was anger.

Amidst his self-reproach there was a strong sense of anger

against Aubrey, who had presumed to interfere with him, and there was also a vague jealousy. What title had his cousin to espouse the cause of Gladys? What right had he to make himself the confidant of her sorrows, or the champion of her wrongs? Her father might have said all this, and would have had the right to say it; but he did not concede to Aubrey any more right to do so than he would have allowed to any one of the gondoliers then idling at his water-gate.

A great irritation rose up in him at the thought of another man being the consoler and adviser of his wife; and he remembered how constantly Aubrey had found time to visit at Ladysrood in spring or in autumn, and to sit with Gladys in her boudoir in the London house, even in the pressure and hurry of a crowded London season. He had been glad of it at the time; he had even constantly thanked his cousin for so much devotion to her interests; but now this intimacy wore to his eyes a less agreeable and innocent aspect. Not that he suspected for a moment Aubrey of any disloyal intent. Aubrey's visit to himself proved his loyalty, and testified to his candour; but the idea of his influence on Gladys and of his defence of her was, to him, exceedingly distasteful.

'If he were married, should I ever presume to take him to task about his wife?' he thought with strong displeasure. The substance of what Aubrey had said might be correct enough; it was the fact that he did say it at all which constituted his offence.

Nevertheless the counsels, neither of his friend nor of his conscience, were of weight enough to turn his steps northwards. He left Venice within a few days and passed on to Naples.

## CHAPTER XLII.

GLADYS did not send the letter she had written, but neither did she comprehend the greatness of the love which Aubrey called on her to give. It was such love as her father had counselled her to attain and striven to inspire in her; love which rises above all memories of self, and pardons all offences against it as God, in the dreams of mortals, pardons theirs. But her years were too few, her heart was too sore, her jealousy was too intense, her passions had been too early excited, only to be left in solitude and oblivion, for her to be able to reach even in mere comprehension the height to which Aubrey pointed.

The days and the weeks passed on, and winter came earlier to Ladysrood than it came to the land where Guilderoy still

found the earth green and the skies and the seas smiling. Always beautiful in all seasons, yet the great house was austere and melancholy towards the close of the year in the short dark days and in the long silent nights. Its immense woods were leafless, its gardens were cold and swept by bitter winds blowing from the high moors beyond ; on still days or nights, when the sea was stormy, the sound of its breakers roaring on the rocks three miles away was audible and dreary as the very groan of Nature herself.

The young Lady Constance grew indignant and rebellious beyond her power to conceal.

‘If you would only go to Illington or Balfrons!’ she said fifty times a week ; and one day she added insolently, ‘Why should I stay here to please you and my mother? What are either of you afraid of? This place is like a nunnery, like a prison. It is charming enough in summer or autumn when it is full of people, but now it would drive a saint to madness. Have you any lover that they are afraid should come to you? Trust me if you have and I will help you. If you tell me nothing I will elope with one of the grooms. It will be life at any rate, and it will make my mother sorry she ever sent me here.’

Gladys did not reply, but a few hours after she said to the girl, ‘I am going to London to-morrow. I will take you to Illington as I pass through your county.’

The girl embraced her, and was beside herself with joy. But she could not resist a covert impertinence :

‘Aubrey is in London!’ she said with a rude smile.

‘I suppose he is, since there is to be a winter session,’ replied her hostess. ‘I shall not stay in London. I am going straight to Paris.’

‘I wish you would take me with you,’ said Lady Constance, repenting that she had not made herself more agreeable, and hastily computing the toilettes, *étrennes*, and pretty things in general which she might have ‘got out’ of the mistress of Ladysrood if she had concealed her own *ennui* and acquired influence.

‘I am very sorry, but I cannot do that for you,’ said Gladys. ‘I will take you home, where you have so much desired to be. That is all I can do.’

She was in that mood in which a woman will rush on to her own torture or her own destruction, and would not stay though a host of angels and archangels stood in her way to turn her back from her self-chosen path.

She drove rapidly through London from one station to another ; at the latter she was, to her surprise, met on the platform by Aubrey. He had received a telegram from Illington

announcing her departure, and Lady Sunbury had had only time to add, 'Prevent her leaving England at all hazards!'

The express was on the point of departure; he had no time to say a word; he entered the carriage with her.

'I must speak to you,' he said hurriedly. 'I can get back to the House by eleven o'clock.'

She did not reply; she was annoyed and offended. She resented this treatment of her as of some imprudent child whom all his family considered they had a right to control.

Aubrey looked tired and unwell.

Times in England were troubled, and political life stormy and thankless. He did not relax his energies; but a weary sense grew on him more strongly every year that the combat was useless, and that, although still veiled under Parliamentary formulæ and constitutional fictions, the country was practically abandoned to mob-rule.

And he looked at the woman whom he admitted to his own thoughts that he loved, and he felt that he was powerless either to touch her heart or to save her from misery.

She was very pale; even her lips were pale, and her blue eyes looked almost black, whilst the dark furs of her travelling hood and of her long cloak enhanced the whiteness of her complexion and the brightness of her hair. She sat opposite to him in silence; she was deeply resentful of his presence there, and she did not aid him by a single sentence.

'You are going to join Guilderoy?' he asked abruptly at length.

'Have I no right to do so?' she asked coldly.

Aubrey gave a gesture of impatience.

'When women speak of their rights their joys are gone,' he thought, and answered aloud: 'No one could dispute your right, my dear. But it is not always wise to use our right. That I have said to you often before now.'

She was still silent.

'You had my letter the day I left you at Ladysrood? he asked.

'Yes.'

'And it made no impression on you?'

'It was very noble, no doubt. But you are not in my place. You cannot judge.'

'Can you judge clearly, do you think? How much do you see that is true, and how much distorted? How much that is wise, and how much unwise? Feeling is a dangerous guide. It leads us into fatal errors.'

'I have resisted mine long enough.'

'And you are tired of resistance. That I can understand. But if you are wise, my dear, and unselfish, you will continue

to resist. What good can it do for you to see him in your present state of violent irritation ?

‘I wish to know the truth.’

‘I would rather,’ she added more passionately, ‘know any truth—the worst truth—than live like a child, like an animal, like a plant, told nothing, hearing nothing, unconsidered and disregarded, as month after month goes on. If I am not dear to him, I am a burden to him : there can be no medium between the two. Let him say so to me honestly, and I will trouble him no more.’

‘What would you do ?’

‘I can live very well on what my father left me.’

‘You mean that you will separate yourself from Guilderoy ?’

‘Will you tell me why I should not ?’

‘There are a thousand reasons. Chief of all there is the supreme reason that you belong to him, and that you care immensely for him, though you now only listen to your anger.’

Her face flushed.

‘It is an insult to say that to me.’

‘My dear child, I do not insult anyone. It is not my habit. It is the highest honour to her that a woman should remain faithful *quand même*. You seem to me to be ashamed of what is really the finest quality in your character. Youth has often that sort of *mauvaise honte* before its best emotions.’

‘You admire Griseldis as my father did !’

‘I do not ask you to be Griseldis. You are not beaten, outraged, or robbed of your children ; that which you have to complain of you would probably have been spared if you had endeavoured to be more indulgent and to pass over what would never have been thrust on you if you had not looked for it.’

The train rushed on through the heavy grey darkness ; the lamp swung above their heads, and its yellow light shone on her face on which a great anger gathered.

‘I know you only care for his reputation because he is a branch of your own great house,’ she said coldly. ‘It is no doubt natural you should feel so. It is perhaps as natural that I should feel otherwise.’

‘That is untrue and unjust,’ said Aubrey, with the only sternness she had ever heard from him. ‘I have been always your friend, often at great cost to myself, and I have more than once run all risks of rupture with my cousin for your sake in the endeavour to persuade him to give you greater happiness, and greater consideration. I say nothing more to you than your own father said, who of course cared alone for you and nothing for my cousin. I endeavour to dissuade you from your journey now, because I know that to follow Guilderoy will only appear to him espionage, surveillance, interference, curiosity,

everything which is most irritating to the pride and to the liberty of man. He left you in irritation : when his irritation is passed he will return to you, if you do not of your own accord raise some insurmountable obstacle.'

She did not reply ; her eyes gazed sombrely through the glass at the darkness of the night and the reflections of the lamp.

'I entreat you,' he continued, 'not to leave England. In England you are with all of us ; you are safe in reputation and in circumstance. Ladysrood is too lonely for so young a woman as you are, but my sister will be beyond expression glad if you will stay with her indefinitely, wherever she be. She said so to me only this morning.'

'She is very good, but I shall not trouble her.'

'This is the sheer madness of obstinacy. What will you accomplish by following my cousin ? He will not pardon it if you follow and arraign him. What good can it possibly do ? What use is the mere momentary indulgence of anger when it must inevitably be followed by a lifetime of regret. The greatest evil of all such upbraidings as you will make to him, if you see him in your present state of irritated pain, is that in them everyone says so much more than they wish or mean, wild and bitter words are exchanged which can never be forgotten, even if they are ever pardoned ; and that which might have been a mere passing sorrow, a temporary estrangement, is deepened and widened into a life-long enmity. I have said to you, before, all that it is possible to say. I only entreat you now to be guided by it, and remain in England.'

Her heart was hardened against her best friend. Like almost every woman she was only capable of believing that those alone loved her who wholly agreed with her and, without reserve, sympathised in all her emotions. She had even doubted her father's affection for her, because it had been critical and temperate in judgment. Her heart now was sore, hurt, apprehensive, full of anger and yet unbearable indignation ; she would have liked her companion to give her limitless, unquestioning consolation and indignation likewise. She longed to weep her heart out on the breast of a friend ; to cry out against fate, and love, and earth, and heaven, and all the cruel treacheries of human life, and hear some voice full of compassion echo all her own cries. But Aubrey seemed to her only to rebuke her ; only to palliate all she suffered from, only to study the interests of his family, and the conventionalities of the world.

It closed her heart to him. She was too full of pain and anger both to penetrate his motives or even for an instant to dream of his self-denials.

He was powerless to persuade or to control her. All the influence which he had possessed upon her before was lost in the flood of blind and passionate impulses let loose in her by the pain of jealousy. She knew well enough that he was right; but she would not open her ears to his counsels or her heart to his kindness.

If he had been less loyal to his cousin, he might have been more successful in his persuasions. If he had conjured her by his own affection he might have prevailed on her to return. But no syllable which could have been even influenced by personal desires escaped him. John Vernon risen from his grave could not have spoken with more absolute self-denial than he did. And he gained no influence, he made no impression; jealousy and indignation, and the bitter sense of ignorance and wrong, were all hardening her heart and driving her on in strong self-will, regardless of the issue of the fate which she provoked.

Every argument which he could use, every inducement, conjuration, and even prayer which he could call to his aid he exhausted in vain. She knew that her husband and the woman whom he had told her he loved more than any other creature upon earth, were somewhere in Italy together. England in its dark and early winter seemed to her only like that ice-prison which holds the bodies of the damned in the verse of Dante.

Wearied, pained, and mortified, Aubrey at last desisted from his endeavours and remained silent, as the train flew through the country silences onwards towards Dover.

‘I am not my cousin’s keeper,’ he thought bitterly. ‘And very likely if he knew what I am doing now he would only misconstrue my reasons, and rebuke me for meddlesome interference!’

There was no sound but that of the oscillations of the train swinging at headlong speed over its iron sleepers.

Neither spoke again till the journey was almost done.

‘You will not warn him that I am going away?’ she said suddenly once.

‘I am not an informer, as I told you once before,’ he answered coldly. ‘But his sister will no doubt find some way to let him know that you have left England.’

‘It does not matter,’ she replied as coldly; and, she thought, wretchedly, ‘He never changes or pauses in his wishes for me!’

The silence remained unbroken until the slackening of the speed of the train told them that they were near the docks of Dover. Then Aubrey stooped a little forward, and, resting his grey eyes upon her sadly, said with great gentleness, yet with a coldness which she had never heard from him:

‘If you have any true confidence in my judgment and in my

affection for you, listen to me now. Return here and wait until Guilderoy comes to you of his own accord. If you have patience that time will not be long.'

She heard the wise words with the impatience of a woman who knows beforehand what advice she is about to receive, and has beforehand decided to follow none of it. Aubrey seemed to her cold, unsympathetic, conventional; she wanted his grief and indignation as her support, she was almost unjust enough to say herself that the clannish feeling of family dignity made him think more of preserving his cousin's name from public comment, than of her own personal pain. She was in that state when every form of consolation or counsel seems an irritant or a mockery; when, as Horace has it, anger being unbridled becomes the violent tyrant of the soul.

'I have a right to know. I have a right to know,' she repeated to herself. They all seemed to deny her that right; they all seemed to think that she should submit to stay in tutelage and acquiescence, asking nothing and arranging nothing until her husband should at his good will and pleasure deign to recall once more the fact that she existed.

Their names were great, no doubt, and their lives were before the world; but if he chose to sully them and give them to idle calumny, it was no fault of hers.

There was a brief and tempestuous winter session then on, from which it was impossible for Aubrey to absent himself even a day. Even if he could have done so, it might have been the cause of more harm than good, he thought, if he forced his presence upon her in the journey on which her heart was set. Even his cousin himself, uncertain of temper and capricious in his judgments, might look on such interference with wrong interpretation of it. He saw nothing that he could do for the time being except to leave her to her own choice of action. Things might, perchance, become better than he feared they would do.

He knew that it is of little use to try to be the providence for other lives. The unforeseen is sure to intervene, and accident at every moment overturns the schemes and the wishes of man with a fractiousness which no one can prevent.

'You must take your own way, my dear,' he said with a sigh. 'I hope you will never regret it.'

Then he accompanied her on to the vessel and bade her farewell.

The night was cold but clear, a sparkling frosty sky and a scarcely ruffled sea. He held her hand a moment in his as he parted from her on the deck.

'I am sorry I cannot come with you to Paris,' he said, with a great coldness despite himself still in his tone. 'But I must



be in the House to-night by eleven at latest. God bless you, dear ; since you will go, be prudent and be unselfish. Women suffer much at times no doubt from the selfishness of men, but sometimes I think they repent their own more bitterly when they give way to it. And how often mere selfishness is called love !'

Then he let her hands go, and left her standing on the deck of the steamship under the clear cold skies.

His heart was heavy as a special train carried him backward in his solitude to Westminster as fast as steam could bear him through the night.

You filled my barren life with treasure ;  
You may withdraw the gifts you gave,

he thought in the words of the unknown writer to which he had taken a causeless fancy. 'Nay, she has given me no treasure at all, and she takes away nothing because she gave nothing. The gift was given to a life not barren, but already over full, and I have no part or share in either her pleasures or her joys. Why should I have ? She has used me like a good big dog which could swim through some rough currents to save her ; but she is now in the deep sea, and if she can be saved it cannot be by me.'

And that tempter which dwells in the heart of man, and which he had once said at Ladysrood made it almost possible to believe in the old-world myths of devilish agencies, whispered to him now that if he had been less loyal, if he had done as other men would have done, if he had used his many opportunities and his power of influence over her to turn her heart away from his cousin, and win it in its revulsion and reaction to himself, he would have done no more than what nearly every man would have done in his place, and in the issue she might have been consoled, and he at the least been happy.

## CHAPTER XLIII.

THE steamer meantime passed on its little voyage through the still frosty air, and over the liquid darkness of the sea. Gladys, enwrapped in her black sables, stayed on deck insensible to cold. She was only conscious of the febrile excitement within her, and of that momentary solace which is always found in any physical movement which relieves or distracts great anxiety.

She went straight to Paris, and descended at an hotel instead

of at the house which Guilderoy rented in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, and which was then shut up and left in charge of the Suisse. She did not wish her movements to be known to anyone. She inquired at the English Embassy where Lord Guilderoy was. With some surprise and, she thought, some embarrassment, his friends there told her that they believed he was in Venice still ; they had heard no change of address from him. She left them to think or conclude what they chose, and went to Venice as Aubrey had done before her. At his palace, where they received her with obsequious deference, she heard that he had left there three weeks before, but where he was they could not say ; he had left no address. She perceived that it was an excuse, a falsehood, but they were at least loyal to the instructions they had received ; she did not try to bribe them into disobedience, which could easily have been done. She paused for a few days at the house, which was always kept in perfect readiness for his arrival. She thought it probable that he might return.

It was cold in Venice, but it did not seem so to her after the north winds which had been sweeping over the woods and moors of Ladysrood when she had left it. The sun was radiant ; the green canals still basked in light, the silvery lagoons bore the little islands on their breasts, the Istrian brigs were unloading their loads of wood in the Giudecca, the Greek traders were landing their varied cargoes at the custom-house, the many-coloured fleet of the little fishing vessels anchored off the Schiavone and the Botanic gardens ; the scene was always charming, various, gay, a panorama of moving, noiseless, delicately-tinted life.

She acknowledged its charm ; but it made her heart almost heavier than it had been under the wintry shadows and dusky mists of Ladysrood. As she let the gondoliers take her over the water and thread their way with unerring accuracy through the crowded craft of the Canale d'Orfano, she lived over again every moment of the first weeks she had passed in Venice. All that passion spent on them seemed to her like a dream ; some remembered poem that could have nothing in common with her own life. The woman can never habituate herself to the early and abrupt cessation of all love's instincts and caresses, which to the man seems so natural and so inevitable. To her that fairy story should be told with the same ardour every recurrent year ; to him it is as dead as last year's leaves.

At times, as she drifted through the silvery wintry air, she blamed herself, recalling every word of counsel which her father and Aubrey had addressed to her.

She had been unwise, she knew, to speak as she had last spoken to her husband. She had been unwise to reject his

proposal to travel with her into distant lands; she had done wrong to repulse so coldly that share in her sorrow which he had offered her with sincere and delicate sympathy. All this she knew, but the vision of his other passions had stood between him and herself, and there was now for ever sounding in her ear the avowal of his love for Beatrice Soria.

That one bitter and restless remembrance haunted her, and would not let her stay in peace amongst the gliding waters and soothing stillness of Venice. She did not know where he might be. She could not write to inquire of mere strangers. She had the whole of the Italian journals which were sold at the news-stalls bought and brought to her. He was so well known in Italy that she thought his movements would be observed and chronicled, however much he might try to guard against it.

For several days she saw nothing; on the ninth day she read in one of the sheets a little line announcing that he was still in Naples. She knew from the Venetians that he had left them some twenty days before. It seemed to her clear as the golden moon rising above the Euganean mountains that he was with her rival.

The voice of her father seemed to say to her from his grave, 'Do not go thither; do not try to compel fate.'

She had done all that she could do to keep off the inquisitiveness of society; she had done more than many would have done to offer a serene and harmonious surface-existence to the stare of curiosity and malignity. But, beneath all that, the aching heart of her youth was angered and seething like a sea in storm; under all her apparent and enforced composure the blindest and maddest of all the passions, jealousy, was tearing her soul asunder.

'I have a right at least to know,' she told herself a thousand times, lying awake in what had been her nuptial chambers; listening to the lapping of the water on the marble stairs below all the long nights through, until the sound of the cannon fired at sunrise on the Giudecca told her that another dreary, empty, anxious, desolate day had come.

'I have a right to know,' she thought, and, allowing Aubrey's letter to be unanswered, she left the Venetian sea-mists and water-ways, and went, also, southward through the amber sun-rays and the roseate lights of a luminous winter's day spreading with noontide golden and glorious over the lagoons and the meadows beyond Alestre.

## CHAPTER XLIV.

It was now the close of November. Beatrice Sorìa was at the great palace of the Soria, fronting the sea, where she still ruled supreme by virtue of her young children over whose lives she was left sole and complete guardian. This palace was one of the marvels of the south, built by Angelo Fiori, with ceilings by Domenichino, and frescoes by Simone Papa; its façade dominated the sea; to its rear stretched large and beautiful gardens. It was here that Guilderoy had first succumbed to her charm in one soft, gay, Neapolitan winter, which ever remained on the memories of both of them as the one perfect page in their book of life.

It was years ago now; but every detail and hour of it seemed to come back to him as on a magic glass, as he saw the long white majesty of the great house tower above its stairs and terraces, and mole of marble. Every delicious and enchanted moment passed there revived in his remembrance; all that their intimacy had had of storm, of dispute, of doubt, of jealousy, of too arrogant dominion, had all faded from his mind as though they had never been. His memories retained only the glow and glory of its noontide light. He utterly forgot the thunder clouds which had often broken over the golden beauty of those days of love.

When at length he roused himself from these memories as he stood on the strip of shore below and gazed at the mass of sculpture towering above him, he mounted the great stairway from the sea and asked of the porter at its gates if the Duchess Sorìa would receive him, he was met by an inflexible denial. Her excellency received no one except from four to six o'clock every Saturday afternoon, and again on Monday evenings from ten. It was then Tuesday.

'With the crowd!—never,' he said to himself; and turned away, with feverish impatience and an aching heart.

He passed the day wandering beside the sea or in the streets.

At night he wrote to her: the first letter he had addressed to her since that in which he had announced his marriage. His declarations were as ardent and as comprehensive in it as those of Tibullus to Cerinthus in the thirteenth *Carmen* of the fourth book. He received no answer; and he was as wretched as Cerinthus's lover.

On the third day after he had sent it, his heart beat breath-

lessly at sight of a large envelope, with the two gold crowns on it, directed in the handwriting which he had once known so well, and which had sent him letters which at one time he had worn in his breast and which at another time he had held to a lighted match and burnt.

He opened the envelope with intense anxiety and suspense. But it contained only a card printed in gold which announced that the Duchess Soria might be visited in 'prima sera' on Monday evenings. There was no written word with it; only his name filling up the blank space left for that purpose on the card.

'Can any woman forget so utterly?' he thought in passion and pain, oblivious that if she had learned the lesson of forgetting, he had been the first to teach it to her.

His pride told him to leave Naples at once without seeing her; he felt that there was neither dignity nor courage in remaining a suppliant at the gates of one who once had been wholly his.

The remonstrances of Aubrey haunted him with persistent reproach, and for the first time in his life he saw his own conduct in its true light. But the ascendancy which Beatrice Soria possessed over him was stronger even than the impulses of pride. He could not bring himself to leave the scene of their former joys, the place where soonest, if ever, her heart would return to him on the impulse of memory.

Moreover, others who admired or adored her, others freer than he to prove their homage, had followed her thither also; and an intense jealousy of all that was possible in her future held him. There, as of old, in those smiling seas, the sirens had held too reckless mortals in their power, and so hers held him now upon these shores. He remained, as though he were a boy of twenty, spending his hours beneath the sea-walls of her palace, and trusting to some favouring hazard to afford him that unwitnessed interview with her which he sought. He did not accept her permission to approach her with the crowd at her receptions. He felt that he could not trust himself to see her first again before a throng, of which many would be strangers and all would be odious to him. Every day at sunset she drove, like other great ladies of the city; and every day at sunset he was standing or riding near when her great bronze gates unclosed. She gave him a salutation and a smile, but never checked her horses. He saw, or imagined that he saw, in the smile a triumphant mockery of himself. He was mistaken: it was merely the slight smile of courtesy which any well-bred woman gives to an acquaintance.

There was no movement of society at that time in the city. The great world of Naples never bestirs itself until carnival

comes. The populace were wild and mirthful in the streets as usual, but none of the great houses were opened except hers. She had all the customs of a wider world than that of the Neapolitans, and had never been bound by their observances.

The empty and fruitless days succeeded one another, and brought him nothing that he wished. At last he remembered that golden key which the classic lovers of this soil recommend to those who would see unclosed a door too cruelly shut against them. All things are saleable still in the land of Ovid and Tibullus, and the honesty of no guardian of the *lares* is more proof now than then against a bribe. He saw, and looked at enviously, in the high wall of the garden, the iron grating of the postern gate, by which he had used to have the right of entrance at his pleasure. The same creeping plants hung over it as in other years; the same blackbirds plucked at the black berries of its flowering ivy; the same great magnolia trees shrouded it in deepest shade; the same sound of falling water came from the fountains behind it, and the same cripple lay on the road in front of it, stretching out his brown and filthy hand for alms. Nothing was changed except himself, nothing gone except his privileges. He even heard the very voice of the same dog as, roused by the sounds of his footsteps, it ran barking along under the wall within.

In time, and with some difficulty—for the dependents of the Soria palace valued their place and feared to lose it—the potent talisman of gain succeeded in drawing back the rusted bolts of the little iron door, and the underling, who had betrayed his mistress for a handful of paper money, held back the dog as Guilderoy passed into the evergreen shades of the familiar garden paths. But the dog, escaping from the gardener's hold, ran to him and leaped joyfully on him.

'Poor Pyrrho, do you remember me? You are more merciful than your mistress!' he murmured, as he caressed the dog, profoundly touched by its affectionate welcome. He walked on under the deep aisles of bay and laurel.

It was dark here in the gardens, though only the first stars had risen over the sea. He had chosen the hour at which she would be sure to have returned from her drive; her dinner-hour was not until nine, he knew, and when she came in it was her habit to sit alone awhile in a small room hung entirely with allegorical paintings by Albani, and having great windows looking towards the sea; it served her as a boudoir and a library in one. Here, again and again, hundreds of times he had found her of old reading some new German or French book of philosophy, or the verses of some Latin poet.

He entered the house by the garden loggia and the apartments which were called the garden-rooms. The servants were

then closing the shutters for the night; but they knew him and were not surprised to see him there, and one of them ushered him without question through the house to the little chamber which was called the *Salotto dell' Albani*.

She was seated with her back to the door, reading, or seeming to read. The light from the lamp fell on the dark gold of her hair, which was the hair of *Palma Vecchio's Barbara*. He could only see the crown of her head, and one fold of her velvet gown, the hue of the dark side of an olive-leaf; all else was hidden by the carved back of her large chair.

He saw her thus through the parting of the velvet curtains hanging before the door. Two lamps were burning low, and shed a roseate light on the room; the windows, still unshuttered, showed the serene night, in which a flush of day still lingered.

He motioned the servant backward, and the man, who had known him well in other days and had then always let him enter unannounced, allowed him to do so now, and closed the door noiselessly.

In a moment, before the *Duchess Soria* had even looked up from the volume she was reading, *Guildcrov* had crossed the room and was at her feet.

She withdrew her gown from the eager clasp of his hands, and a flush of anger rose over her face.

'You have bribed my servants!' she said with unutterable scorn.

'You left me no other way. You would not answer me. You would not see me alone.'

'Why should I see you alone? As for answer I already answered enough—more than enough—at *Aix*.'

'It is an answer which I will not take!'

'You must take it, since it is my will to give it.'

She withdrew her hands from his hold with something of the violence which he had once known in her.

He kissed the folds of her skirts.

'I will not take it; I do not believe in it. All can never be over between us. Here, in this sacred room, which heard my earliest vows to you, I swear that you are the only woman whom I have ever loved in my whole life.'

'To how many women have you said so? And how dare you recall vows which were only uttered to be forsworn?'

'I have said so to no other woman. No other—living or dead.'

'You have said so at least to your wife?'

'Never. I never loved her.'

'Then why did you marry her? No woman can have either compassion or respect for any man who knows what he wishes so little as that.'

He coloured with offended pride and irritated pain.

‘I am human,’ he said angrily. ‘Men have never, that I know of, in any part of the world’s history, been conspicuous for consistency where their passions were involved.’

‘Do you not understand what an insult to all passion such inconsistency is?’

‘No; passion is, in its very essence, wayward and shifting as the winds. You reproach me with my mutability. But you only do so because you will not endeavour to understand. It is only comprehension that is ever pitiful.’

She looked at him with a long gaze, under which his own eyes fell.

‘I think I understand you perfectly,’ she said in her low, sweet, dreamy voice. ‘You study your own pleasure. You do not consider anything beyond it. I loved you immensely. It is no flattery to you to say so since, for nearly seven years, I never disguised it from you, and the grave of your child is there in attestation of it. You knew that you were my world; yet the moment that a new caprice attracted you, you dismissed me with scarcely more consideration than you would have shown to a *femme entretenue*. I said nothing; I could not avenge it, and women of my character do not complain or appeal. Now, because you see me sought by other men, or because perhaps your feeling for me was of a deeper kind than you knew, you are as ready to throw aside your allegiance to others as you were ready then to throw aside yours to me for them. Why should I give you either pity or credence? Why should I believe in the strength of feelings which have never been more stable than a marsh-light which flits hither and thither? You do not know what love is. You have too much self-love to know it.’

He sighed as he heard her; his conscience told him that there was truth in the charge. Yet he knew that his love for her was very great; what proof could he give her which would persuade her of its strength?

‘You are unmerciful like all women,’ he said at last. ‘May I, without offence, tell you a truth also? I did love you greatly—as much as it is in me to love at all. But you tried me often. You were too exacting, too imperious, too passionate. We always revolt when we feel the curb. It was a momentary impatience; not of you, but of the dominion you sought to have over me, which made me fancy that in marriage I might perhaps find greater tranquillity and more genuine peace.’

‘Besides which, Lady Guilderoy was very lovely, and you wished for her, and you had never denied yourself any whim or any desire! It is very possible that I was unwise and exacting. Few women are otherwise; and I have one pretension I confess, one which you knew of old: I reign alone, or I reign not at all.’



Guideroy smiled wearily.

‘Is that worthy of your knowledge of our weaknesses?’

‘Perhaps not. I make no claim to consistency. But what I claim I give. The world considers me a coquette because I have power over men. But I have never been a coquette in the sense of dividing my affections. I will admit, even though it flatters you, that I have always been true to you though you were false to me.’

He bowed his head and kissed her hands. His eyes were dim with tears.

‘Did you doubt it?’ she said with a little disdain. ‘How little our lovers know of us! Our hearts beat against theirs, and our lives mingle with theirs, and yet they go from us knowing no more of our real natures than if they had embraced things of wood or of wax! Is it stupidity, or indifference? I suppose it is the immense blindness of self-love. And you are all of you so blunt in your perceptions and so coarse,’ she pursued. ‘If a woman has hazarded her position for you, though you know she is all yours, and is as faithful as Dido, as tender as Hero, yet in your rude and clumsy classifications you will, in your own thoughts, bracket her with Lydia and Laïs!’

She put his hands off hers almost roughly for a woman of such slow and languid grace of movement.

‘Not I,’ he murmured, gazing at her with eyes in which she might read more than the worship of old.

‘Oh yes! you—you more, perhaps, than most men. When you wrote me your letter of farewell you ended it in delicate phrases because you are a gentleman, but the truth which pierced through them was that you left me as you would have left any bought companion of your pleasures.’

‘No; ten thousand times no!’ he said vehemently. ‘You imagined what was not there. You exaggerated the offence to you. Women always will. I might be ungrateful, unworthy, failing in appreciation and penetration as you say, but I never for a moment failed to render you the honour that you merit.’

She smiled faintly.

‘Since you left me how can you expect me to believe it? If you leave your wife to-morrow will she believe that you honour her?’

‘Why will you speak of her?’

‘We must speak of her. She exists.’

‘Let me forget that she does so!’

The same faint dreamy smile came on her mouth; he could not tell whether she believed or disbelieved him; whether she esteemed him true or false, whether she loved him still or had put him wholly from her inner life.

‘You must be aware that your offence to me is one which no

woman who has any pride can pardon. You love me, you do not love me, you think you love me again, you vacillate, you doubt, you forsake, you adore, and you expect me to humbly await you while your heart oscillates to and fro, now close to mine, now leagues away from mine.'

'I expect nothing,' he said bitterly. 'I have lost the right to expect, if I were ever happy enough to possess it. Only if you will tell me any test by which I can prove you my sincerity tell me what it is, and then you will learn whether I now speak on mere caprice or not.'

She was silent, while all the light of her deep and lustrous eyes seemed to plunge into his and through them search his inmost soul. She was silent some moments, and she could hear the loud fast beating of his heart.

'There is only one test possible for me to accept or to believe in,' she said at last.

'Tell me what it is; or, indeed, I will consent to it untold.'

'Do not be too rash,' she said, with a cold and momentary smile. 'You must, however, know very well what it is. Leave your wife for ever and I shall believe in your love for me.'

He turned away pale and he was mute.

'You hesitate?' she said with interrogation and disdain.

He sighed heavily.

'It is a demand which does not affect myself alone.'

'Did your demand of the past affect yourself alone? What demand of love, or of life, can ever concern oneself alone?'

'You mean to leave her publicly?'

'Yes; nothing less than that. I will accept no divided allegiance. It was for her that you insulted me. It must now be her whom you surrender for me.'

He was silent.

'My honour,' he said at last, but he hesitated, and she filled up the sentence.

'Your honour! You mean your conventional deference to the world's opinion. You are weary of your wife, you shun, dislike, and avoid her, but you consider your honour saved, if you affect with her, for society, a union which has wholly ceased to exist either in fact or feeling. I tell you you know nothing of genuine passion or vital pain. You are honest neither to myself nor her.'

He was silent; he breathed heavily; his heart was torn between conflicting emotions.

'Remember,' said Beatrice Soria coldly, 'I do not ask this of you; I do not even wish it; much less do I counsel it. I only say, as I have a right to say, that such alone is the proof of your sincerity which I can accept or credit. You already seek from me patience, forgiveness, and oblivion of no common sort,

I have a right to answer that I can only give you these on certain conditions. You can fulfil them or reject them as you please. There was a time, I confess, when I could have died of the pain of your abandonment. But that time is past. You have taught me to live without you. I can do so now and in the future. It is a lesson which no man who is wise teaches to any woman.'

He sighed as he heard : the words were the same in meaning as those which Aubrey had spoken to him of his wife.

'What are your conditions?' he asked in a low voice. 'Tell me more clearly. What is it you exact? Your right I admit; I have never denied it.'

'What I have said. That you should leave your wife, and make it known to her that you leave her for ever. You will write a letter of farewell to her which I shall read and send. It is for her that you insulted and forsook me. It is her now whom you must sacrifice—if you are now in earnest.'

He was silent a moment ; then he walked to the table near on which were paper and pens and ink, and a litter of opened letters. 'Tell me what to write,' he said with the same sound in his voice, which was half sullen and half implored. He plunged one of the quills in the ink, and turned to her and waited.

'No. Not in that haste,' she said ; and she rose and closed her writing-table. 'You shall not say or think in the future that I hurried you into an agitated and unmeditated act. Years ago we were mad like that, but such madness is over. Your choice must be deliberate and wholly voluntary. It will last out your life and mine. Go now. If you choose you can return to this room at this hour to-morrow. If not, leave Naples, and do not attempt ever again to see me or to speak to me, either alone or in the world.'

Before he could reply or remonstrate she had touched a handbell which stood near her ; one of the men of the ante-chamber answered.

'Show my lord to his carriage,' she said to the servant.

Guilderooy could not resist such dismissal. He kissed her hand with the slight salutation of an acquaintance and left her presence. The servant ushered him with ceremony through the house and out by the great gates of the sea front. He was scarcely conscious of what he did or where he went ; and he found himself standing on the beach beneath the marble wall, with the placid sea before him shining under the stars, a few boats rocking in the silver of its surf.

## CHAPTER XLV.

UNNERVED, beset with a thousand conflicting emotions, divided between intense desire and that honour which his education and his instincts made a second nature to him, Guilderoy left the hall and went home across the gardens to the palace which he had occupied half a mile away. The night was very brilliant; the stars seemed strewn thickly as diamond dust; all the ear-piercing and countless noises of the Neapolitan streets had ceased; there was no sound but that of the murmur of the sea. He walked through the white intense moonlight and the dim shadows, now passing some recumbent figure lying stretched in sleep upon the stones, some basket of violets whose tired seller had fallen asleep beside them on a marble stair, some Madonna's lamp burning within a sculptured shrine. He looked at nothing, neither outward to the sea, nor upward to the stars, nor downward at the slumbering beggars. His eyes only saw, as it were, painted on the radiant night, the face of Beatrice Soria.

What she had demanded of him was a greater price than if she had asked of him the sacrifice of existence itself.

He was a man to whom the curiosity and comment of the world were intolerable; to whom the honour of his name had been always sacred and kept intact through all his follies and excesses; his attachment to John Vernon lying dead in his grave at Christ'slea was sincere, and his sense of the duty owing to his memory was strong.

The hours passed uncounted; he had no sense either of hunger or thirst; he was wholly possessed by the agitation of his senses and his emotions, and the struggle which was violent between his desires and his consciousness of what honour asked of him.

The memory of Gladys as he had seen her first on the moors in the pale autumn morning came over him with a pang of wistful repentance and regret. The recollection of her in the first days of her marriage to him smote him with the sense of having sacrificed some innocent and trustful animal on the altars of his own brief and destroying desires.

He knew that to both the woman whom he had married and the woman whom he had loved he had behaved with the unkindness which is the inseparable offspring of a purely selfish and physical passion. He saw himself for the moment as others saw him; and he condemned himself as they condemned him in these solitary and bitter hours of self-examination.

What Aubrey had justly defined in him as a feeling not of affection but of egotism towards his wife, made it terrible to him to appear to other men as wanting in respect or in regard for her. He was sensitive to the insolence of public comment; and he abhorred the thought that through him the world would talk of her. He remembered her father with contrition and self-condemnation; he remembered his own violent self-will in insisting on the caprice of his momentary desires, and all the wisdom with which John Vernon had endeavoured to dissuade him from his folly. He could not possibly blame anyone except himself. He could lay at no one else's door the difficulty and temptation in which he was now placed. He had blamed her indeed for want of sympathy and affection, but he knew that he had had little right to do so.

He passed the night hours pacing to and fro beside the sea. Once he bade a boatman row him out on to the moonlit water, and he watched from it the receding shores.

The boat drifted on under the stars on the open sea; the rower, half asleep, steering mechanically with his foot, and ever and anon idly dipping his oars into the waves. Guilderoy was stretched at full length, his head resting on the bench, his eyes watching afar off the stately pile of the Soria Palace towering against the moon-bathed clouds, whilst the fragrance of its orange gardens came to him over the waves. After all, it seemed to him, his first duty was to the one who dwelt there.

His marriage had been a supreme wrong done to her. If she could find reparation or consolation in his love now, he thought that he was bound in honour to afford them to her; at least his wishes led him to try and believe so. And he loved her more than he had ever loved any woman; her touch, her voice, her regard, stirred the very depths of his soul as no other's had ever done. Years of separation had given to his desires the freshness of a new passion, and the keen jealousy with which he had watched the homage of others had intensified it tenfold. He was in that mood in which a man feels that all other things may perish if his love be left to him; the cry of Faust, 'I give my soul for ever so that this woman may be mine!'

It seemed to him that he never really lived save when he was with her. His senses were stimulated, his intelligence was aroused, his wandering fancies were captured and concentrated by her as they were by no other woman. The very indignity which he had inflicted on her, and which she had pardoned, endeared her to him; she had not clung to him in slavish humility, but she had loved him and forgiven him with a greatness which ennobled her in his sight. Such madness might be past with her; in him it was as living still as when, years before, he had first watched the stars rise over these waves and the

moon shine on the pale sculptures of her palace. She believed that he was incapable of suffering; but he felt that he drank its fullest cup to the lees. She was the only woman on earth to him; the world seemed to hold no other. But a remorse which was in its way as strong as the desire of his soul was also at work within him. He knew that he would act with surpassing disloyalty if he deserted so young a woman as his wife, and one so wholly blameless.

She had been unable to content him indeed; she had failed to correspond to some fanciful ideal which he had formed and imagined for a few months to be incorporated in her. She was not what he had wished or what he had cared for; but that was no fault of hers. She had promised him nothing which she had not fulfilled, and she had borne his name blamelessly through all trials.

In what she had said to him on the day that he had left Ladysrood she had been wholly justified by facts; and though he had so violently resented her words, his conscience told him that they were wholly deserved; that they had indeed been more forbearing than many a woman in her position would have made them.

As ludicrous and commonplace thoughts intrude themselves sometimes on the deepest and most tragic emotions, there recurred to his mind his conversation with his sister on the evening when he had announced to her his intended marriage; and of how he had replied to her prophecies of woe with the jest that no one ever abandoned his wife in these latter days, unless it were a workman who went off with the household savings to the United States. It had always seemed to him so easy to live so that the world need know nothing of private disunion or dissension; so easy to conduct existence on the smooth lines of outward courtesy and apparent regard; so easy to shut the door politely in the face of a staring world in such a manner that it should imagine there was perfect felicity behind it. He had always been disdainfully censorious of those who had not the tact or the good taste requisite to preserve these externals of harmonious agreement which are all that the world demands. And now he himself was on the brink of affording to the world that spectacle of disordered passion and of public severance which had always seemed to him so coarse and so unwise!

Amidst all the heat and confusion of his thoughts there came over him the memory of John Vernon's pale calm features in the mask of death as he had seen them, with the summer sunlight falling soft and warm upon them, while the little birds had sung outside the casement underneath the leaves. The pang of an immense remorse, the throb of a great shame, stirred in his heart. Egotist though he was, given over to pleasure and

indifferent to rebuke, he felt ashamed and guilty before the mute reproach of the dead man's memory.

'I gave you all I had,' the voice of the dead seemed to say to him. 'I gave it against my will, and I warned you that you would use it ill. What have you done with it? What will you say to me on that day when you, too, come before the tribunal of the grave?'

He shuddered as he lay under the golden December moon, shining cold as steel down on the steel-blue seas. What had become of his honour? Where was his good faith to the dead? To a living man he might have been untrue, had he chosen; but to be false to one who could never arraign him, never offend him, never rebuke him!—he seemed to grow a coward and a liar in his own sight. All better things, all higher truths that he had ever believed in, awakened in his soul, and bade him suffer what he would, lose all he might, but be faithful to his word to one who was no more numbered with the living. He gazed at the faint white shore gleaming afar off under the moonlit skies.

'My love, my love!' he murmured, 'I cannot be dishonoured even for you! He trusted me——'

The tears filled his eyes, and the shining seas and the starry skies grew dim to his sight.

'Put me ashore,' he said to the boatman. His resolve was taken.

## CHAPTER XLVI.

WHEN he at last reached his own residence and crossed the court to enter his own apartments, it was nearly but not quite dawn. Large lamps swinging from the ceiling dimly lighted the two ante-chambers. In the second of them his body-servant was lying, fully dressed, face downwards, on one of the couches, tired out with his long vigil. Guilderoy, sunk in the gloom of his own thoughts, did not even see the man, and passed on to the three large rooms which divided the vestibule from his bed-chamber.

It was an old palace; lofty, spacious, magnificent, faded and dull. Busts of dusky yellow marble, weird bronzes stretching out gaunt arms into the darkness, ivories brown with age, worn brocades with gold threads gleaming in them, and tapestries with strange and pallid figures of dead gods, were all half revealed and have obscured in the twilight. As he moved through them, a figure which looked almost as pale as the Adonis of the tapestry, and was erect and motionless like the

statue of the Wounded Love, came before his sight out of the shadows. It was that of Gladys.

He paused, doubting his senses. With her long black robes and her pale features she looked rather a creature of the grave than of the earth, in the faint and fluctuating light which fell on her from the swinging lamps above.

For some moments neither of them spoke.

‘What has happened?’ he said at last, instinctively. ‘Why are you here?’

He expected to hear of some calamity, of Ladysrood burnt down, or of his kindred dead. She was silent. She was deadly pale; there seemed nothing alive in her except her intensely searching eyes, which gazed at him.

‘For the love of God do not look at me like that!’ he cried involuntarily. ‘What has brought you from England? Why do you wait for me at such an hour?’

‘It is the hour at which you have left the Duchess Soria,’ she said, in a voice which was low but harsh.

His worn face flushed.

‘That is absolutely untrue! I left her house at eight this evening.’

She gave an impatient movement which said without words, ‘Why lie to me?’

‘I tell you that I left her house at eight,’ he repeated. ‘You shall not insult her in my hearing.’

‘But you may insult me in hers!’

‘I never insult you. I speak of you always with the most unfeigned respect. But if you begin to track me, to lie in wait for me, to spy on me, to catechise me, I tell you honestly that I shall respect you no more, nor will I patiently endure such espionage.’

All the gentler and more remorseful emotions towards her with which his breast had been filled as he had paced the solitary shores and the deserted streets had been destroyed in an instant by the sight of her in his apartments and by her mention of the one name dearest to him.

‘Who has a right to be near you if not I?’ she asked with a haughty anger which scorched up the tears that mounted to her sight.

‘No one disputes your right,’ he answered with great impatience. ‘But between right and welcome there are many leagues; and the title to come to me unbidden I would never award to any woman were she ten thousand times over my wife.’

‘I am come to solicit nothing from you,’ she said coldly.

‘Oh no! Only to watch for me, to trace out my actions, to question me, to fetter me, to haunt me, to offend me!—’



'Is it so strange that I wished to see you, to know something of you? For three months you have not written to me, only to your servants; I heard that you were here; here with her—the only woman whom you have ever loved—so you told me!'

Her words were broken, and her voice had a great emotion in it; but that which would have touched him in his mistress only angered him the more intensely in his wife.

'I forbid you to bring her name into this discussion!' he said with more passion. 'You choose to follow me, and to make me reproaches; it is the way of women; they only lose all by it, but they are never deterred. I came away from you because you asked me intolerable questions and wearied me with useless scenes; if I have not loved you it has not been my fault. Love is not to be whipped into obedience like a straying child.'

'Why marry me?'

'What is the use of saying that again and again? You said it in London; you said it at Ladysrood. I deceived myself, and so I deceived you—with no thought or desire of deceit. When a man tells a woman candidly that he mistook his love for her, what more is there to say? He should ask her pardon, perhaps, for the wrong he has unintentionally done her. In that sense I ask yours.'

She did not reply.

'It is better you should know,' he continued rapidly. 'You will not care perhaps. If not, so best. I was about to write to you. I am true to an allegiance promised before I promised mine to you. I am aware the world does not recognise such unwitnessed vows, but they are all love cares for; they are all that ever really hold love, let men say what they will. I must tell you, since you are here, the entire truth. I can give you no more of my life; I can live no longer in a feigned harmony which has wholly ceased to exist if ever it did exist. I do not think it ever did between us; you may hate me, and the world may execrate me; but so it must be henceforth.'

He paused in strong emotion; he was neither heartless nor ungenerous, and he knew that his words must of necessity sound both. He hated to give pain to any living creature; and though she seemed so cold and still that he doubted, as he had always doubted, her feeling greatly, yet he knew that any woman must suffer, so addressed, even if she only suffered in her pride.

He waited for her to reply; but she said nothing. She stood motionless with perfect tranquillity.

The words were honest and truthful, but to their hearer they seemed cruelty and brutality incarnate. Had not her

pride restrained her, she could have cried aloud like some animal in torture. But she was very proud, and whatever agony she might suffer afterwards, she had force to hold back any expression of it now. Moreover, a consuming jealousy was upon her, giving her temporary strength; and yet her whole existence seemed racing and whirling from her as a great river courses in its haste and storm towards the bottomless sea. She looked at him where he stood under the falling light from the lamp, pale, agitated, angered, and she could have thrown herself upon his breast and cried to him, 'I love you! I love you! give me some place—the least, the lowest—but some place in your heart!'

But pride kept back that yearning impulse; she stood, erect and cold, in her black clothes, with the sombre light of an unutterable reproach burning like flame in her dark blue eyes.

'You are, again, the lover of the Duchess Soría?' she said doggedly.

It was the most fatal thing she could have said, but she was not wise enough to know that. Guilderoy's face flushed hotly; he felt all the impotent fury of a man forced to say what it seemed infamous to say no matter how he might reply.

'If to adore her be to be her lover, then I am so,' he said with violence. 'In no other sense—now—as yet.'

She heard the first declaration; she gave no credence to the second; she thought it the mere conventional declaration with which a man deems it necessary in honour to deny his relations with a woman.

'I came to hear this from your own lips,' she said with perfect coldness. 'I have heard it. There can be no longer any doubt. I will go now.'

'Go where?' he asked in vague uneasiness.

'That cannot matter to you. Farewell!'

His anxiety deepened despite his anger and his preoccupation. Her manner seemed to him unnatural. Its serenity was not in keeping with the burning pain and rebuke spoken in her eyes.

'Why will you make me these scenes?' he said wearily. 'I was thinking of you kindly when you lay in wait for me thus. I cannot endure surveillance, interference, espionage, and when you speak of the woman I love more than all others on earth you madden me.'

She smiled bitterly.

'I will leave you to that other woman. Surely you can ask no more. Believe me, I shall make neither complaint nor scandal. I remember what my father wished. Your name and his are safe with me.'

'I will write to you,' he said hurriedly, embarrassed and distressed. 'All possible arrangements or consideration shall be made ;—all that I have is yours. I am deeply sensible of the injury I have done to you in making you my wife when you were too young to know my character or your own, or measure the feelings of either of us. But if your father sees now, as some say the dead can see the souls of the living, he will know that I was entirely honest in all that I promised then, both to him and to yourself.'

His eyes were dim and his voice was uncertain as he spoke ; a great emotion moved him, and it seemed to him that she felt nothing whatever—nothing save some indignant scorn, perhaps at most some outraged pride.

'She does not really care ; she knows nothing of love,' he thought. It seemed to him that any woman who had loved him would have either poured out to him all the furies of a disappointed and deserted passion, or have fallen at his feet weeping in agonised supplication.

But she gave no sign either of violence or of wretchedness.

At her father's name her mouth trembled, and he thought for a moment that her composure would desert her ; but she soon recovered it. Whatever she felt, she betrayed none of it.

'Be good enough to let me pass,' she said coldly ; and mortified, humbled, yet angered with a sense of injustice done to him as though he were the offended, not the offender, he drew back and let her go as she desired.

'Where are you going ?' he said with hesitation. 'You cannot go like this, all alone, in a strange city.'

'My servants are waiting. I will return to England. Why do you even ask me ? It cannot matter to you !'

'It must matter.'

He was confused, agitated, passionately angered, and yet all the while conscious of a vague fear that in her strange stillness and repose she would do something rash and irrevocable, something which would haunt him all his life long with remorse.

'Let me pass,' she said, with her forced serenity unbroken. 'I have told you I leave you free ; what more can I say ? You need fear nothing for any tragedy which might embroil you with your world. I shall go home.'

But as she went out before him through the bare dim rooms, her step unflinching and her head erect, he realised how impossible it was to let her leave him thus unprotected—a woman who was his wife, who was as young as she and as fair to look upon, alone in the streets of such a city as Naples was at such an hour.

'I must accompany you at least,' he said as he overtook her. 'You cannot go out in these streets alone—I will take you wherever you will.'

Then, and then alone, her self-control forsook her; she turned upon him with the rapid and violent action of some animal wounded and tormented beyond its power to bear.

'When my whole life is destroyed by you, can you insult me by offering me mere formal external courtesies? Can you think that it would matter to me if any beggar of these lanes stabbed me and dragged my body to the sea? What do you know of love, of grief, of pain, of sacrifice? Nothing—nothing—nothing—no more than those marble gods that stare there in the dusk. Let me go! You shall not stir one step with me. I have told you that my servants wait below. There shall be no tragedy such as you fear should hurt your reputation as a man of honour with the world!'

Then, with the swiftness of that step with which she had once gone careless and lighthearted through the moorland gorse, she went through the shadowy chambers, past the still sleeping servant, under the great brazen lamp burning in the entrance, and down the marble stairway of the silent house.

He did not follow her.

All the gentleness and self-reproach with which he had thought of her in the night just passed died utterly out of him under the sting of her disdainful and cutting words. Though she, like the woman whom he loved, charged him with insincerity and heartlessness, he knew himself that he had neither; he knew that, whatever he appeared to both of them, he suffered with genuine emotion and with true self-reproach. He had said no word to her which had not cost him more to utter than it cost her to hear. He had ideals and dreams of what could never now be realised, and he had the instinctive honour of a nature both proud and sensitive. Even though he had no feeling for her of affection, she might still have kept him by tenderness; but her words, which had struck him to the quick, had hardened against her all the feelings of his soul. Beatrice Soria might rebuke and might condemn him, but she at the least loved him with a passion which forgave all, if it in turn exacted all.

Through the iron gratings of the large unshuttered windows of his rooms the first white light of day came faintly through the dusker lamplight, falling on the pale figures of the tapestried hangings and the yellowed marbles of the Cæsars and the gods.

He threw open the casements and let the sharp, clear, cold air of earliest day pour past him into the shadows of the rooms. When the sun rose he sent three lines to the Soria Palace:

'I found her here. I told her the truth. We are parted for ever. When may I come to you?'

They brought him in answer three words only :

'When you will.'

## CHAPTER XLVII.

A FEW evenings later Lady Sunbury was in her own house of Illington in the midst of a large circle of guests. It was two hours after midnight, her drawing-rooms and ball-room were full ; everyone was amused and amusing ; she was going from one to another with bland smiles and suitable phrases, her harassed thoughts all the while with her elder daughter, who was encouraging the wrong suitor, and her second son, who was lying dangerously wounded in India.

In the midst of her occupations and preoccupations, at the moment when the cotillion was at its height, one of her servants called her away and presented to her a letter which had been brought by a messenger from Italy. She recognised in the superscription the handwriting of her brother's wife, and on the seal the coat-of-arms of the Vernons.

'How exactly like her absurd extravagance !' she thought with contempt. 'How exactly like her to send a servant all the way by express with a letter, just as if we were in the days of the Stuarts or Tudors ! What does she suppose that the postal service and the electric wires exist for, I wonder ?'

Innovations in trifles always annoyed her more than anything else ; she was so extremely irritated at this folly of her sister-in-law in sending a man-servant to carry a letter by hand from the continent to England, that in her annoyance at the trivial eccentricity she almost forgot her curiosity and apprehension as to the possible contents of the packet.

She took it, however, to her boudoir, and there, being alone, opened and read it. The letter was written by Gladys from Rome, and began without prefix or preliminary.

'Do not blame your brother for anything that you may hear of him. The fault is altogether mine. I am not a woman who could possibly make him happy as his wife. I am cold, hard, and unforgiving. My father even told me so more than once before he died. Therefore blame me entirely, and not Lord Guilderoy, for our ensuing separation. There need be no publicity or scandal of any kind. I am sensible of the many gifts I have received from him, and I shall not return them with

ingratitude. But neither will I see him, nor speak with him, nor live under the roof of any of his houses. Except that he cannot marry again whilst I live, he will be as free as he was before we unhappily met that autumn day upon the moors. I hope that you will tell him so from me. I shall take none of my jewels, nor shall I touch a farthing of my income from my settlements. What I have inherited from my father is quite enough for me to live upon. I have no children living, so there need be no question whatever of the interference of lawyers. I shall reside at the cottage at Christslea, so that you can all judge for yourselves that my manner of life is worthy of my father's memory. But I beg that you will none of you seek for a moment to attempt to change the resolution which I have taken, for it is unalterable, and interrogation and expostulation would be only unbearably painful to me. You will, I entreat, lay all blame which may be incurred upon me. The world has always considered me ill-suited to him. It will not be astonished that a union so inharmonious should be ended by that want of sympathy and temper which it has always attributed to me. You have often reproached me with doing nothing to save your brother's honour. I now at least do what I can. You repeatedly condemned me for poor-spirited silence. Be sufficiently just not to condemn me now for acting as you have frequently more than hinted to me that I should do.'

The signature was Gladys Vernon.

When Hilda Sunbury had read the letter through to the end, her first impulse was to start at once for the south; the next moment she remembered that it was impossible and would be useless to do so; she could not leave Illington for any length of time with her house full without her absence being known; and what had been already done in Naples was hopeless and irrevocable. After an instant's meditation she sent for her eldest daughter.

'I have had news which must take me to Balfrons to-night, she said to her daughter. 'You know my uncle is lying very ill there. I do not wish anyone to know that I am absent. I shall return the day after to-morrow. You can say I am indisposed from cold and have to keep my room. Make no fuss. Amuse everyone. Be discreet, and do as you would do if I were here. I shall be back in thirty-six hours. Say nothing to your father. It is not worth while. He would only ask innumerable questions.'

Then with the utmost speed and quietness she left the house, drove seven miles to take the morning train to the north, succeeded in reaching it on the eve of its departure, and hastened as fast as steam could bear her across the length of England to where the mighty keep of Balfrons rose above its oak

woods and faced the Cheviots. She knew that Aubrey was there.

With the open letter in her hand, she passed unannounced into the library where he was seated alone. He was at Balfrons for two days only. His father was ill, and was at that age when any slight illness may easily pass into the last ill of all. No one was staying at the Castle except the Duchess of Longleat and her two younger children.

He rose in amazement and alarm as his cousin entered, for it was nearly midnight.

‘Gladys?’ he asked instinctively, thrown off his guard.

Lady Sunbury cast down the letter on the table before him.

She was pale with passion, which she had nursed in all its heat and strength during the lonely hours in which she had sped through the cold dark winter country from Buckinghamshire to Berwick.

‘What did I say?’ she cried, her voice hoarse with fatigue and indignation. ‘Did I not always tell you that you would encourage her in her sentimental, headstrong, insensate follies until she would bring disgrace upon us all?’

Aubrey took up the letter, having in that moment’s pause recovered his self-possession.

‘“Disgrace” is a very large word, and not a common one in our families,’ he said slowly. ‘Let me see what she has said to warrant its use.’

He read the letter slowly, so slowly that Lady Sunbury’s impatience became well-nigh ungovernable. She did not know that every word of it went to the innermost heart of the reader with that deepest of all sorrows—that which is powerless to aid the life beloved.

He held it in his hand when he had finished its perusal.

‘What is it you blame so much?’ he asked. His cousin, seated opposite to him at the great table at which he had been writing when she had entered, grew red with indignation and suppressed feeling.

‘What? what?’ she repeated. ‘Everything, surely everything, shows the most wanton disregard for us, the most theatrical resolution to obtain publicity, the most intolerable selfishness, the most obvious intent to ruin my brother in the world’s esteem! And to write it to me—to me! You are her confidant and confessor; you have always been so; why could she not send such a declaration of her projects to you, if sent it must be at all?’

‘It is natural that she should address you; a woman, and her sister-in-law,’ said Aubrey coldly. ‘But, pardon me, do you suppose such a deliberate resolution as this can be arrived at by anyone so young without some very great provocation to

it? She does not say what it is; but I imagine that both you and I can guess.'

Lady Sunbury's conscience stung her, remembering the scene which she had made to Gladys in the King's Alley at Ladysrood. But she was not a woman to acknowledge error.

'Very possibly she may have had things which pain her,' she said slightly. 'But other women have as much and more to pain them; and their sense of duty and of dignity serves to keep them silent.'

'Yes, they keep "silent" by leading a life of eternal disunion, bickering, and upbraiding as you do!' thought Aubrey as he answered aloud:

'I think you forget her youth; in youth these wrongs seem to fill heaven and earth; as women grow older they grow used to them, no doubt, as the camel grows to his burden. The letter seems to me irreproachable. She asks nothing; she demands nothing; she injures nothing; she sacrifices everything, and she allows you to place all the blame on her to the world. What can anyone do more generous than this? I fail to understand.'

'You mean to say that there is nothing to be done!' she exclaimed.

'What should be done? said Aubrey, with the only impatience which had escaped him. 'If a woman decides to leave her husband, and he decides to live so that she has no choice but to leave him, who is to reverse that position? They can reverse it themselves, as long as there is no legal separation.'

'And she is to be allowed to live in this insane manner in solitude in her father's cottage?'

'No one can prevent her doing so but Guilderoy, and it seems to me that he has lost all possible title to command her even if he wishes to do so, while it is most probable that he does not. There is no disgrace in her limiting herself to her own resources; there is even a certain dignity in it, as I consider!'

'Because you are bewitched and infatuated about her!' said his cousin with rude contempt.

Aubrey kept his temper marvellously.

'I believe I am neither one nor the other. I regretted her departure from England. At your request I endeavoured to dissuade her from it. I did not succeed. She was unhappy, and when a woman is so she is never very wise. I conclude from this letter that on her arrival in Italy she learned what did not make her happier. The steps she takes are extreme, that I grant, but they only injure herself, and there is no one except her husband who can have any possible power to try and turn her from them.'

'He will not stoop to solicit a woman who leaves him.'



‘Stoop! You speak as though he were faultless and she had committed some crime against him! You must know as well as I do that something much graver than his usual caprices must have moved her to write such a letter and take such a resolve. Do you suppose that a woman as young as she is voluntarily severs herself from all the pleasures, graces, and interests of life, unless life, as it is, has become wholly intolerable to her?’

‘And her duties,’ asked Hilda Sunbury, with violence, ‘do they count for nothing? Is she to be allowed to play at tennis with the honour of my brother’s family as her racquet?’

‘My dear Hil’<sup>a</sup>,’ replied Aubrey wearily, ‘you have always considered that all creation exists only for the honour of your family. To others creation may still seem to have some additional, though no doubt minor, objects in view. However, even from that point, I scarcely concede that you can violently censure Lady Guilderoy. She offers you all possible occasion for examination into her life; she simply announces her intention of not living with your brother or in any of his houses. If he cares, he will seek to change her decision; if he does not care, he will necessarily be glad of it. Anyhow there need be no immediate scandal; at any rate unless you are pleased to make it.’

‘I!’ exclaimed his cousin, disbelieving her senses. ‘What do I most abhor if not to have a single breath of the world breathed on me? What have I not endured that society should never suspect what I have suffered? What women have not I compelled myself to receive in my own homes in order that the outrages inflicted on me should not form food for social calumnies and ridicule? Who in the whole width of English society has been so constant and so resigned a martyr as myself to all the indignities which a man who does not respect himself does not hesitate to inflict on those whom he should respect? And then you presume to say that I—I!—I, shall bring about scandal concerning my brother’s wife! It is herself who brings it. How can a woman do what she is doing without bringing about her ears a thousand hornets’ nests of curiosity and misconception? How? Will you tell me that?’

‘The hornets’ nests will come no doubt. They are everywhere,’ said Aubrey, with a sigh of impatience. ‘My dear Hilda, forgive me if I speak plainly; your own life has been a painful one; you have spent it in acrimony, reproaches, futile efforts to make black white, and endless quarrels which have never furthered your purpose one hair’s breadth. Your brother’s wife, being unhappy, chooses a more drastic but a more dignified vengeance. There would be a third way open to any woman who had the strength, the patience, and the unselfishness for it,

and I could wish that she had taken it. I endeavoured to persuade her to take it; but she is young, and in youth and in pain the feelings are treacherous counsellors. What more is there to be said? It is to your brother that you must go. It is useless to come to me. I am not the guardian of Lady Guilderoy, nor am I my cousin's keeper. I have no more whatsoever to do with this sad letter than my dog Hubert yonder. It is a mistake on her side, an error, and a grave one; but he has brought it about by a much darker fault on his own, and he cannot complain. Neither you nor I can possibly interfere. We have no title to do so. If your brother acquiesce, all his relatives must acquiesce also. Of that no reasonable doubt can be urged for one moment.'

The great dog, hearing his name spoken, rose and approached, and laid his head upon Aubrey's knee; his master stroked him with a sigh.

Passionate and injurious words rose to Lady Sunbury's lips, but she repressed them unuttered; she was pale with rage and offence, but she had sense enough not to insult a man whom the nation respected.

'You cannot altogether disclaim responsibility for her actions,' she said with unkind and insolent meaning. 'You have guided them for a long time. You must pardon me if I do not credit that this letter and the resolutions contained in it are altogether so unfamiliar to you as they assume to be. You were the last person who saw Lady Guilderoy in England, and everyone is aware that you have been for a long time her most cherished and trusted friend.'

Aubrey rose to the full height of his great stature, and stood at the end of the great library table as he had often stood at the table of the House of Commons.

'You are a woman and my cousin,' he said slowly. 'Both persons are privileged in you. But be so good as to remember that I do not allow even a lady to cast a doubt on what I have said was a fact; and you will kindly take care not to hint the insult which you have just hinted outside the walls of Balfrons.'

She was imperious, courageous, and full of dark and insolent suspicion, but, bold though her temper was, and uncontrolled, she did not dare to affront or offend him farther, and she was silent.

'It is late,' said Aubrey. 'Allow me to accompany you to your rooms. You will see Ermyntrode in the morning. She retired very early, for she was fatigued with watching my father. To-night he is quieter and asleep.'

Then with all courtesy and ceremony he waited on her across the halls and corridors and galleries of the great castle, and only bade her good-night at the entrance of that suite of rooms in

the tapestried wing which were always set aside as hers, and which were warmed and illuminated for her now as though she had been expected there since noonday. He was not conscious that he had kept the letter from Gladys in his hand, and she had been too enraged and mortified to ask him for it.

He walked slowly back to his library in the midnight stillness; everything was hushed into greater quiet than usual that the rest of the old Marquis might not be disturbed. The lamps burned white between the armoured figures, the drooping banners, the trophies of arms, the massive and fantastic carvings of the oak-panelled walls; his own steps sank soundless on the thick carpeting. Hubert followed him with noiseless velvet feet.

He paused before one of the great unshuttered casements, with their iron gratings, which had been there in the Wars of the Roses, and the blazonries of the House of Balfrons stained upon their glass. The night without was frosty and moonlit. There was snow on the ground, and snow lay on the roof, the turrets, the corbels, the battlements of the mighty Border castle. The keep, round, massive, terrible looking, like a fortress for giants, in the starry night, towered up in front of him upon the other side of the quadrangle.

He had a deep and filial love for Balfrons, and if public life had not called on him for absence, he would seldom have left its treasure-house of books, and its great forests filled with wild cattle and red deer, and all water-birds and moor-birds which ever haunt the reedy meres of the old romantic Border lands.

He sat down in the embrasure of the window and read her letter over again, word for word, by the light of the lamp hanging above his head. There was not a sound in the house. The clouds swept past the casement in large, moonlit, hurrying armies. The deep bell of the clock-tower tolled midnight.

Every word of the letter sank into his heart like a knife. Every word thrilled with the violence, the misery, the despair of a great pride which was writhing under abandonment, outrage and misconception. The step she had taken was unwise; it had a child's rashness, a woman's obstinacy, and a forsaken woman's recklessness; but there were a self-negation and an austerity in it which were in their error very noble, and touched chords in his own nature which responded to them.

'I think she would have been happy with me,' he thought; and he sighed as he looked out at the cold and luminous night and the great keep towering to the skies.

But now, though he would have laid down his life to save her, he could not give her one hour of peace. A furious longing came over the calm, grave temper of Aubrey to cast all other considerations, public and private, to the winds, and avenge

her wrongs upon his cousin with the rude, frank championship of another age and country than their own. But reflection told him that such an act could do her only harm : could only give her name more completely to the world's tongues, and could only possibly awaken in her husband's mind doubts which would dishonour her, and give him, in his own eyes, a palliative for his own offence against her.

'I have no title to interfere,' he thought sadly. 'I am not her lover. Scarcely even did she at last accept me as her friend.'

A thrill of what was to him degrading and criminal, because a selfish pleasure, passed through him at the memory of the utter loneliness to which she had condemned herself, the dangers, the barrenness of the future which she had shaped for herself. But he hated the cruel egotism of the thought ; he spurned and checked it as it rose in him.

'How vile we are at heart !' he mused with disgust and shame for the momentary selfish hopes which had intruded themselves on him in his own despite. 'How odiously vile !—and yet God knows if I could by any personal sacrifice purchase her happiness there is none at which I would hesitate.'

But what sacrifice could avail anything ? Her happiness and her wretchedness lay in other hands than his.

## CHAPTER XLVIII.

It was a winter's day when the woman whom he loved reached the little cottage at Christ'slea, having travelled without ceasing, pausing only for one night in Rome, the night in which she had written the letter to her sister-in-law.

The bay was shrouded in the white fogs of a damp December ; the waves were rolling heavily with a deep roar upon the beach ; the winds were sighing amongst the leafless orchards and over the bare scarps of the cliffs.

She went into the little study, still crowded with her father's books and papers, and bolted the door, and sat down before the fire on the lonely hearth. All was still, grey, inexpressibly solitary. The little place was gay and fragrant and pleasant in summer time, when the hedges were full of the songs of birds, and the air full of the scent of wallflowers and stocks blossoming in the homely garden ways ; but it was intensely melancholy in the winter season, with the silence of mist and cold brooding over its solitudes.

She shuddered as she looked at the narrow casements, where the glass was wet with the vapours of the morning, and the grey veiled landscape was dull and blotted like a drawing soaked in rain. It seemed an emblem of her future existence. She for the first time realised the choice which she had made, the thing which she had done.

From the time she had left the palace in Naples until she arrived here she had had no distinct sense of what had happened to her. She had been sustained by the violence and the fever of an intense passion, by the iron in her soul of an immense wrong; she had gathered a fictitious strength from the magnanimity and the dignity of her choice, and the calmness with which she had spoken to her husband had lasted throughout her journey homeward until this moment, when, having dismissed the servants who had accompanied her in London, she had come wholly alone to the little house where her father's memory was her sole companion, and would be her sole consolation in the future. Then, when, not heeding or replying to the startled and agitated questions of the two old people left in charge there, she came into this chamber where her father's presence seemed a living and near thing, the sense of all she had given up, of all she had accepted, came to her for the first time in all its nakedness and horror.

She did not regret what she had done: she would have done it again had she been called on to ratify her choice: it seemed to her the only thing which was left for her to do in common honour and in common courage; yet the pale and ghastly terror of it faced her on the threshold of this chamber like some ghastly shape. The want of the one familiar voice so often heard there, the one unfailing tenderness so often proved there, overcame her with the sickliness of irrevocable loss. The pale grey walls, the pallid vellum volumes, the white discoloured manuscripts, the dull misty windows, the cold hearth, seemed to her like so many mourners mourning with her.

'Father, father!' she cried piteously to the blankness which was around her; the silence alone echoed the cry.

With a gesture of agonised supplication, of heart-breaking prayer, she stretched her arms out, seeking some shelter, some embrace, some kindly hand. The narrow walls of the little book-room went round and round giddily before her sight; the casements narrowed into a single point of light. She fell face forward senseless upon the floor, and a great darkness like night closed in on her.

When she recovered consciousness she was lying on the little bed which had been hers in childhood, and she saw the withered brown face of the old woman who had kept house there from her earliest memories stooping above her in anxiety and wonder,

She did not speak, she did not move ; she lay still and gazed at the whitewashed walls, the sloping ceiling, the narrow lattice ; and she remembered to what a future she had condemned herself. She saw always before her the face of her husband as she had seen it in the light and shadow of the Italian moonlight—cold, pale, angry, handsome—his eyes resting on her without a ray of tenderness in them, his lips speaking passionate declarations of his loyalty to her rival.

The long swoon, which had frightened the people of the house, had been due to cold, fatigue, long fasting, and great emotion. It left no evil result after it, and with a new and strange weakness making her limbs tremble and her brain turn, she went down the narrow stair in the morning light to take up that life which was henceforth to be her portion.

There was a fire burning on the study hearth, and the old folks had set some homely winter flowers in the grey Flemish jugs on the centre table. The pale sunshine of a fine wintry day was falling on the black and white lines of her father's drawings on the walls. She sank into his large writing chair before the table on which his last written sheet, with the pen on it, lay as he had left them on his last day of life, and she tried to realise this catastrophe which had befallen her, this earthquake which had shaken into ruins all her summer world.

The violent agitations which had followed on her arrival in Naples, the hurried and scarcely conscious journey homeward, the suddenness and irrevocableness of her own actions, had given her a stunned and bewildered feeling like that of a sleeper roused from his dreams to hear of some misfortune rudely told.

She had written her letter to her sister-in-law with clearness, force, and calmness, but with that effort her nerves had given way ; a burning fever, a painful sense of exhaustion, had followed on it, and though she had controlled all outward sign of them until her arrival at Christ'slea, they left her enfeebled and unnerved. She was terrified by the violence of the passions which she felt, and which had been intensified by the control over them which she had maintained whilst in her husband's presence.

'Am I no better than this?' she thought, ashamed and appalled at the furies which raged in her breast. She leaned over the fire, shivering and hot by turns as if with ague. She did not regret her choice ; she had no other which would have seemed to her endurable ; but the horror of her future was very ghastly to her, and as she sat alone in the little dull room, with the rime frost white on the panes of the window and the noise of the waves coming up through the silence, the memory of the

gay Southern sunshine in which she had left him, the perfumed air, the sparkling seas, the shores of the Sirens, was ceaselessly before her, and life seemed to her a burden too intolerable to be borne.

The slow dark day wore on ; the clock ticked off its tedious hours ; the fire burned bright or burned dull ; there was no other change. The old dog who had been at her father's feet in his last moments lay beside her, lifting every now and then drowsy and tender eyes to her face. They brought her food, but she could not take it. She drank a cup of milk : that was all. She took up her father's Virgil, and tried to read the passages in which she had been used to take most delight, but she could make no sense of the familiar lines ; the letters swam before her sight, and she laid the book down with a sick despair.

Would all her life be like this ?—with every interest of art and intellect, every innocent pleasure of nature, every harmless charm of existence, made void and useless to her ?

' Ah, how little my dear father knew ! ' she thought, seeing the red embers of the hearth through blinding tears. He had bade her make her love so great that no other woman could give its equal. What use were that ? What avail to pour out gold at the feet of him who only sees in it mere dross ?—to offer the universe to one who is only impatient of the gift ?

There was nothing in her that her husband cared for ; what mattered it to him that she was altogether his, body and soul ? He would in all likelihood be more grateful to her for an infidelity which should set him wholly free.

## CHAPTER XLIX.

As she sat thus till the sombre day grew to the third hour after noon, she heard the latch of the garden lifted and a man's footsteps crush the wet shingle of the pathway to the porch.

She rose, breathless, her heart beating to desperation with the wildness of a sudden hope.

She thought it possible that Guideroy might have followed her there, might have repented of his choice, might have come to offer her his atonement and regret.

A terrible disappointment blanched her white face whiter still as the door opened, and she saw in the shadow of the passage-way beyond the lofty statue of Aubrey.

He was the best friend that she had on earth, but had he

been her cruellest enemy the sight of him could not have hurt her more than it did then.

Aubrey came up to her and took her hands in his with unutterable tenderness and compassion.

'My poor child—my poor darling—how I grieve for you,' he said with broken voice.

Then she knew that he must have read the letter which she had written in Rome.

'Yes, Hilda showed me your letter,' he said, answering the interrogation of her regard. 'It shocked me. I would have given my right hand that you had not written it, still more that you had not been caused to write it. For it is a fatal error, Gladys.'

'I could do no less,' she said coldly. The reaction of the intense hope which had for a moment leaped up in her made her feel sick and faint; she disengaged her hands from his, and seated herself by the hearth in the great chair, her back almost turned to him.

'You could have done nothing at all. It would have been wiser,' he said with infinite pity. 'My dear,' he added reproachfully, 'only think what it is that you have done. What will you have made of your life? Could you not have had a little faith in my warnings?'

She hardened her heart against her truest friend; she gathered her pride about her coldly and stiffly; she saw in him only the messenger and mouthpiece of her husband's family.

'I have done nothing that any of Lord Guilderoy's friends can blame,' she answered. 'I have said nothing to any one of all my acquaintances, and I shall say nothing to any of them. I only ask to be left alone. I am sure that I am living as my father would have wished me to live, and I shall spend nothing but that which he has left me.'

She spoke in a measured and constrained voice as to a stranger. She could not forgive Aubrey what she thought his preference of his cousin's cause and desertion of her own.

'You have done most unwisely,' he said, with a sigh. 'I am not defending my cousin, God forbid! He is beyond all defence, all excuse, and I should be ashamed to attempt to give him either; but you would have had fuller sympathy from the world at large and greater comfort, I think, in your own thoughts if you had taken no active part in the destruction of your ties to him.'

'I did nothing more than was my right,' she said coldly.

'That I do not dispute. But, as I told you, a woman's rights are her rashest councillors. After all, dear, what has one human being of real "right" over any other's life? To claim affection is idle. If it be no longer ours we must break



our hearts as we will. We cannot bridle the winds. We must wait in patience till they blow again whither we would have them.'

'Then no woman must ever listen to the words of any man!'

'I did not mean that. I meant that when we have the calamity to be loved no more we must revile neither man nor woman, we must look within. Maybe we shall there see the cause of our woe.'

She flushed hotly with anger.

'How have I been to blame? It is not my fault that his caprice only lived a day.'

Aubrey was silent. She understood that his silence was blame.

'You are unjust, like all his family,' she said passionately. 'I have made no scandal, no exposure, no publicity. I shall make none. What more can his friends demand? He is left in peace with the only woman whom he loves!'

'My dearest Gladys,' said Aubrey wearily, 'I am not defending him. It has gone hard with me not to revenge you with old-fashioned violence which would have made him pay for your tears with his body. You may believe that not to do so has been the greatest effort of my life.'

Her eyes softened and grew dim.

'Is that really true?'

'I do not say what is not true, dear.'

She stretched her hand out to him. 'I thank you very much,' she said in a broken voice.

Aubrey kissed her hands with reverence and an emotion which he endeavoured to subdue.

'I am no lover or knight, my dear,' he said sadly, 'and the publicity of my life makes indulgence in romance impossible to it; but I should be less than a man if I did not feel for you the deepest, the most indignant sympathy. That your wound should have been dealt you by one of my kindred makes me feel it like a personal dishonour—'

He paused, and with a strong effort controlled, unuttered, words of greater tenderness and fuller confession.

'But I will tell you honestly,' he added, after a pause, 'that I regret and blame your actions. They will cost you dear, and you have not measured the price of them. There is much that is fine and even heroic in yours. But can you honestly say, dear, that you believe your father, were he standing here now, would tell you that you had done well or wisely?'

She was silent. She was truthful to assert a belief which she could not entirely feel.

'You cannot; for he was a wise and good man. He knew

that women are always their own enemies when they follow the dictates of pride, and of pique, and of jealousy. Pardon me if these words seem unfeeling; they are inadequate to express the great wrong that you suffer from, but after all they are the only ones which can describe the impulses which you have acted on now.'

'May there not be such things as outraged decency and delicacy and indignant honour?'

'Yes, no doubt; who could deny them? But feeling alone is the most dangerous of guides. It drowns us in deep waters while we think ourselves safe on dry land. You imagined you were sparing Guilderoy the comment of the world; on the contrary, the world blames him and blames you equally, and through you, where it would only have seen a mere passing difference, will now see a scandalous and unalterable offence.'

'I cannot help it if his passions are so made that they do not last a year; if it is what he has not which always seems so much better than what he has. It is not my fault if he married me as he would buy a *cocotte* and tired of me as he would tire of her. I have released him as far as I can possibly release him until death takes me. I will not eat of his bread, or live under his roof. I will not wear a gown he paid for, nor a ring he purchased; even my marriage ring I threw down before him—he did not even see it—what did he care? He was only thinking of her; sighing for her because she had the wit to assume indifference to him!

She spoke with violence and with vehement scorn; he had never seen her so strongly moved before, often as he had had to soothe her indignation and persuade her into peace.

All that she had endured in silence since she had left Naples broke out in these the first words which she had been able to pour into the ear of any listener.

He stroked her hair tenderly as he might have touched the hair of a suffering child.

'Calm yourself, my dear,' he said gently. 'Many women suffer what you suffer now. Only, believe me, the remedy you have chosen is one which will harass and deepen your wound and never heal it. You have called the world in as your physician. It is one which kills and does not cure.'

'Perhaps it would be best that I should kill myself; I have thought of it often. But I always remember that my father thought suicide a cowardice. Sometimes I am inclined to do it, it would set him free. Perhaps he would think of me with kindness if I were dead.'

'And are there none who would regret you more than that?' said Aubrey with a rebuke in his voice which he could not restrain.

'No; why should they? If I am nothing to him I am nothing to anyone.'

She spoke wearily, listlessly, thinking only of herself. Aubrey's heart beat quickly: he said nothing, and she did not look at his face.

There was long silence between them, filled only by the lulling noises of the sea.

'It is impossible that you can remain here!' he said abruptly at last. 'You are too young, twenty years too young. You wish to stay the tongues of the world; what can set them in full cry like such an act as this?'

'They will say I am cold and odd. They have said so very often before. That is the worst they can say—I have never heeded it.'

'It is not the worst! They will attribute motives to you of which you do not dream.

'What motives?'

'My dear! when a woman does not live with her husband, society is always sure that she lives with some one else. You force me to be brutally sincere.'

Her cheeks flushed; she raised her head with hauteur.

'My life is free to all his family to observe. There is no concealment in it. It is as plain to be seen as the white face of that cliff.'

'That is the sublime madness of innocence! The more open, simple, and harmless it actually is, the more will the world be certain that it conceals a secret and an intrigue.'

'That must be as it may. My own conscience is enough for me. And surely you forget; the world knows—it cannot choose but know—that Lord Guilderoy finds his happiness elsewhere.'

'And the world, which is always ready to excuse the man and accuse the woman, will very possibly say that it is pardonable he should do so, because—who knows what devilry they will not say? Only of this you may be very sure, that they will never believe that a woman of your years voluntarily shuts herself in such solitude as this without consolation.'

'They can believe what they please. If they place the blame on me, not on him, I shall have done what my father always bade me do—bear his faults for him. I shall receive no one. It is impossible that calumny can invent anything, unless they find sin in the gulls of the air and suspicion in the rabbits of the moors.'

'They will find it even in these, doubt not, rather than find it nowhere.'

'They must do so then.'

'You are cruel and perverse.'

'I do not mean to be either. But I will not reside in any

one of your cousin's houses, nor will I touch any shilling of my dower from him. I am nothing to him. He is nothing to me. I only still keep his name because I cannot be relieved of it without publicity, nor even with publicity, I believe, as the laws of marriage stand.'

'No, you could not. And you would not free yourself if you could.'

'Why do you say so?'

'Because you always care for him. Some day you will pardon him, some day he will ask you to do so, and such forgiveness will be the renewal of affection.'

'Never!'

'Oh, my child! how long does a woman's "never" last? So long as the man whom she loves does not kneel at her feet, and no longer.'

The colour deepened in her face.

'What you say to me is an insult. I have no feeling for the lover of the Duchess Soria; or, if I have, I pray God night and day to tear it from my heart, for it is dishonour—abasement—ignominy! When I forget it or forgive it, you may tear my heart out of my body and throw it to the hounds of Balfrons!'

'Do not make rash vows, my dear,' said Aubrey gently. 'Women forgive everything when they really love.'

'No—no—not that!'

'Oh, yes, and far worse than that. What use is love if it be not one long pardon?'

'Then it is one long weakness!'

'Or one long and inexhaustible pity—one long and infinite strength.'

There was a tone in his voice which soothed the passionate unrest and indignation of her soul. It seemed to her as though she heard her father's voice speaking by Aubrey's lips.

'You are good,' she said wistfully. 'I wish you had loved me and I you.'

The words were as innocent as though a child had spoken them, but they tried the forbearance of the hearer of them with a cruel martyrdom.

He rose hastily, glanced at the dusky shadows of the declining day, and bade her a hurried farewell.

'You will come and see me often?' she asked him, as she held his hand in hers. He looked away from her.

'As often as I can, dear. You know I have so little time for my own affairs. You shall always know where I am, so that you may send to me in a moment if you need. Adieu. Believe me your firmest friend, even though I am no flatterer and do not pretend to approve you in what you now do. I will write

often to you, and you will write to me. I hope that you will soon write to tell me that you renounce this cruel choice of life.'

The calm and unimpassioned words cost him much in their utterance. He longed to offer her his life, his soul, his endless devotion, to put away all national needs and duties from him and cleave only to her, if he could comfort her or atone to her in any way; but he resisted the temptation and left her with kind and tranquil farewell. He knew that her heart was not his, he believed that it would never be his; he scorned to try to persuade her that indignation and revenge and loneliness and gratitude mingled together could ever make fair counterfeit of love. The lesson might be taught perhaps with time. A bruised heart is often like a wounded bird; it falls to the first hand which closes on it; but he thought that such affection would never be love in any sense, in any shape; he believed that all love which would ever stir in her breast was now and would be ever given to the man who had abandoned her.

Other men, more easily contented and of less susceptible honour than he, might have endeavoured to supply the lost passion, to replace the perished joys; to persuade her that all she felt of bitterness and wrong could be most deeply and surely, and most thoroughly in kind, avenged by the acceptance of other sympathies and other affections than those which were denied her.

But Aubrey's were not the lips to utter these persuasions or these sophisms; nor would he, well as he loved her, have cared ever to accept the mere fruits of a tortured jealousy and humiliation, which in their sufferings might have imagined themselves love.

As he left Christslea he looked across the misty wintry wold, across to the horizon, where the brown woods, the shining roofs, and the many spires and towers of Ladysrood were faintly visible on the grey clouded edge of the far moors.

Its master had left his fairest treasure unguarded and unremembered, thought Aubrey; if any bore it away from him whom could he blame but himself?

## CHAPTER L.

THE days and weeks and months drifted on; the chilly spring, the uncertain summer, the stormy autumn of an English year succeeded one another, and the dawn broke and the night fell

over the lonely shore of Christislea, bringing no change in the monotony of Gladys' existence.

Guilderoy remained out of England. The world, with its usual discrimination, pitied him and blamed Aubrey.

'*Vox Fœminæ vox Dei*,' and women without exception took part against Gladys whenever they now remembered her at all, which was but seldom. They were all of them certain that she could have been entirely happy with her husband had she chosen, since he was always so charming; it was her want of amiability and of tact, they agreed, which had caused his errors. No one with such exquisite manners as his could be otherwise than most easy to live with; ah! why had he thrown himself away on anyone so utterly unsympathetic?

Here and there some man who had always admired her beauty, or who had reasons of his own for knowing that Guilderoy was not a faithful husband or a constant lover, lifted up his voice in her defence; but such a one was always in a very narrow majority, and rallied few to his opinions.

Hilda Sunbury, moreover, had pronounced against her sister-in-law: that was quite enough to condemn her. She was not, indeed, at ease in her own conscience for having done so; but that society did not know. She was a woman of honesty of purpose and rectitude of character. She was aware that she had been the primary cause of the final separation between Guilderoy and his wife, and she was constantly haunted by Vernon's farewell words. But her dislike to the mistress of Ladysrood had been stronger than her candour or her justice; her prejudices for her family were stronger than her regard for pure truth. She had the power of swaying her world in favour of her brother to the injury of his wife, and she exercised the power, indifferent to the claims of innocence and right.

'I always knew you were an unsympathetic woman, but I never thought that you were an unscrupulous one until now,' Aubrey said to her unsparingly in that London world which she was using all the force of her unimpeachable position and her distinguished virtue to turn against her brother's wife.

'I say what I believe,' she replied, with chilly dignity and great untruth.

'Ask your God to forgive you for your thoughts, then,' said Aubrey.

He felt all the disgust of a man who knows the innocence of a woman before the calumny of her by other women.

He knew that Hilda Sunbury in her soul was as fully aware of the purity of her brother's wife as he was; and her efforts to stain the whiteness of Gladys' name, that her brother's faults might be dealt with leniently by the world, seemed to him as dark a crime as any murder; almost worse than crime, because

more cowardly, since secure from all punishment. He himself was powerless to avenge it. Any protest of his made the position of the one whom he desired to protect more questionable.

Almost everyone believed that he was her lover: he felt that, though no hint of it could ever be given to him. He knew it by the silence of others about her to him and before him; he knew it by that instinct with which both men and women of sensitive temperament become conscious of the opinion of their society about them, even when it is most carefully hidden from them. He knew it by the unwillingness of his sister, once so warmly her friend, to speak at all of Gladys to him.

There is a silence around us at times upon the name dearest to us which tells us without words that others know that it is thus dear.

More than once he was tempted to write to or seek out Guilderoy; but he felt that by him, as by society at large, his interference on behalf of Gladys would be at once suspected and disregarded, might injure her greatly, and could do her no possible service.

And his wrath was so bitter against one who could remain absent, lulled in voluptuous pleasures, whilst her life was beating itself as painfully against its prison bars as any bird's, that he felt incapable of preserving any measure in rebuke, or even insult, if he once allowed himself to address his cousin either by spoken or by written word. Any quarrel between them would become of necessity national property for public comment. Rank, like guilt, 'hath pavilions but no privacy.'

Meanwhile, despite all, she herself did not repent her choice. She would not, for all that the world could have given her, have continued to dwell in his house and spend his income. She would not at any price have borne the constant stare of wonder or the semi-smile of pity with which she would have been met in society by those whose spoken words would only have been of homage or of courtesy. Of all unendurable positions hers would have been the most painful, had she been living amongst his acquaintances and friends. Here at least she had such kind of tranquillity as solitude can afford. The fisher people on the shore asked her no questions; the bright bold eyes of the orchard birds had no cruel curiosity in them; and the unobtrusive counsels written on the pages of the dead men of old had no inquisitiveness or censure underlying them as those of living speakers would have had. She was glad of such isolation, as all those who suffer from humiliation as well as from calamity are glad of it. But it seemed to her as if the whole world were dead, and she alone living in it.

All that stir and blaze and noise and change and pomp and pageantry of society, in which she had dwelt ever since her

marriage, were all gone as though she had never known them. A silence like that of a tomb seemed always around her. The steep white cliffs which rose in a semicircle around Christ'slea were like the walls of a dungeon. She heard nothing from the misty dawns until the starless nights, except the rolling up of the waves upon the sands, the cry of the owls flitting at dusk amongst the boughs, the distant shouts of the crews in the fishing cobbles out at sea, or the shrill weak voices of the old man and woman of the house garrulously quarrelling over their work in garden, kitchen, cellar, or apple-house.

Sometimes it seemed to her as if the years of her life with Guilderoy had been only the mere dream of a night. She felt material losses, too, which it humiliated her to acknowledge. The homely and simple ways of life at Christ'slea were irksome and barren to her. All which she had despised, whilst she had enjoyed them, of the beauty, the graces, and the luxuries of existence were now lacking to her, and she missed them with a continual sense of need of them which surprised and mortified her. She had believed herself wholly indifferent to those mere externals; those elegances and indulgences which in the imagined asceticism of her renunciation she had counted as wholly unnecessary to her. She missed them at every turn, at every moment; she realised how much they contributed to the ease and grace if not to the happiness of existence. Her father had voluntarily resigned them all, and no expression of regret for them had ever escaped his lips, and she had fancied that she could imitate his philosophy. But the youth and the sex in her had not either his resignation or his endurance; and she suffered from the mere physical and material deprivation of her solitude as he had never done, having attained the tranquillity of middle age and of a scholar's stoicism. She had over-estimated her own strength, and underrated the power of memory and desire.

The little lonely house which had been the heaven of her childhood was the prison of her body and her spirit now. She had force of character enough to make her adhere to her decision, but she had not coldness of nature enough to make her at peace in it. She had known all the fullest joys of the passions, and all that the world could give of pleasure and of admiration. She could not resign herself to these empty, joyless, stupid, eventless hours which succeeded each other with eternal monotony as the lengths of grey worsted rolled off the ball with which the old housekeeper knitted hose from noon to night, by the hearth in winter and by the porch in summer.

It was in vain that she strove to find those consolations in study which her father had never failed to find; in vain that she opened the black-letter folios and the Latin volumes in



which, as a child, she had thought it her dearest privilege to read; in vain that even in her father's own manuscripts she found nothing of wisdom, although their precepts of patience were as true as those of Publius Syrus. In vain did she seek those calm and golden counsels; they fell cold as icy water on the heat and pain of her restless suffering. When she looked off from the written or the printed words she saw the face of her rival, and she heard the voice of her husband saying always, 'She is the only woman whom I have ever loved. God help me!'

Often she pushed the books and papers aside, and went out in all weathers, when the white rain was driving in fury over the moors, and when the waves were rising in a wall of foam to break in thunder on the beach.

Nothing hurt her. She returned home often drenched to the skin, but she took no harm. Great pain, like great happiness, often bestows an almost more than mortal immunity from all bodily ailments. 'And I am always well!' she sometimes thought, almost in anger with nature for its too abundant gifts to her of health and strength.

'He will think I do not care,' she said to herself bitterly, 'because I do not die!'

She knew that, with a man's hasty and superficial judgment, he was very likely to think so if he thought of her at all.

From the summit of the moor which rose behind the house she could see Ladysrood in the far distance. On the rare days of sunshine the gilded vanes and the zinc roofs glittered in distant points of light above the woods. The great house was left to that silence and darkness which had been so often its portion in other years. Once or twice some of the old servants came to Christslea and begged to see her, for she was beloved by the household; but she did not encourage them to return. She had sent for her dogs, and for some of her books from there; that was all. She would not even have any of her clothes. With an exaggeration of feeling, which even to Aubrey seemed morbid and overstrained, she stripped herself of everything which had become hers by her union with Guilderoy, and wore the plainest and the cheapest apparel that she could find. But the beautiful and symmetrical lines of her form gave their own nobility to those humble stuffs; and in her rough serge, white or black, she had no less distinction than she had had in her pearl-sown velvet train at a state ball.

The insincerities, the conventionalities, and the feigned friendships of society had always been painful and oppressive to her, even when she had been comparatively happy amongst them. In her present circumstances they would have been an intolerable torture. She had her father's sensitive horror of

compassion and of comment, and if alone and wretched at Christslea she was at the least unmolested. Her retirement had been a nine days' wonder to her acquaintances ; in a short time other mysteries, other scandals, other interests took its place : she was not there, others were. Society, with the indifference which follows its curiosity as surely as night follows day, ceased to speak of her, and almost forgot that she existed.

She had been left unopposed to abide by the choice she had made ; and of her husband she heard nothing. He had passed out of her existence as utterly as though he lay in his grave like her father.

'If he were dead they would tell me,' she thought : 'if he were dead they would remember, for a day at least, that she was his wife.'

Unconsciously to herself, her selection of Christslea, amongst other reasons, had been actuated by the sense that there at least she would be sure to hear if any accident or illness befell him. She could not bring herself to ask for tidings of him even of Aubrey ; but she knew that the Lord of Ladysrood could have no great ill happen to him without such at once becoming the common talk of the whole country side. Day and night she thought of him as she had last seen and heard him, passionately declaring to her his preference of her rival and his allegiance to her. Yet even in that moment he had seemed to her stronger, manlier, more worthy, than he had seemed to her before in the incessant duplicities and the half-hearted intrigues of his other and less open infidelities. At least there was on his lips no lie, and in his acts no subterfuge.

Even in the agony of the jealousy and the indignity which consumed her, she reached some faint perception of what her father had meant when he had bade her attain a love which could see as God saw, and pardon as men hope that their God pardons them. But it was only in brief, far separated intervals that such perception came to her ; for the most part she was devoured by those burning tortures of jealous imaginations which make every moment of existence almost insupportable to those they torment.

She recovered her bodily strength quickly ; she had too perfect health for it to be easily overcome by any suffering of the mind or of the senses ; the vigorous and abounding life which filled her veins became a cruel mockery of the weariness and barrenness of her empty days and her starved affections. When she had thought of Christslea as a haven of rest in which she could let her sick soul lie hidden in peace, she had remembered it as it had been with her father's presence filling it as with the benign and cheerful light of spiritual sunshine. She had forgotten that without him it could be only a lonely and

dreary cottage like any other, a bald, poor, empty life, lived out face to face with eternal losses and eternal regrets.

What had been left her through her father was a trifle indeed ; no more than one of the head servants of Ladysrood was paid a year ; but it was enough for such few wants as her life here comprised, and the rental of the cottage she paid into the hands of the steward every three months.

‘My lord does not permit me to receive it,’ said the steward, in infinite perplexity and distress.

‘But I insist that you shall take it,’ she replied. ‘Pay it into the poor-box of Ladysrood parish church if you can do nothing else.’

And it was paid to the poor accordingly. She would not owe to him one square inch of the soil in which the stocks and the sweet-briar grew. Everything that was not the gift of her father, or of Aubrey and his sister, she had left behind her ; all her costly wardrobes, her furs, her laces, her fans, her pictures, her jewels of all sorts, remained in his houses where they were, locked up in their chests and cabinets and cases, and the keys were deposited with his men of business.

‘You have acted as though you were guilty, and not he,’ Aubrey said to her again and again, remonstrating with what seemed to him exaggerated feeling.

‘I could not have borne my life if I had kept any single thing of his,’ she answered, with an energy which was almost violence. ‘Everything he ever gave me is at Ladysrood, from my bridal pearls down to the last gift he bought for me.’

‘I do not deny that there is nobility and renunciation in your withdrawal into this obscurity and beggary,’ replied Aubrey, ‘but it is a mistake. It has made a thing which the world need never have known become inevitably the world’s talk. It may sound priggish, pretentious, or unfeeling perhaps, my dear, if I say so, but I have always held that people of our order have no right to gratify their own private vengeance, or even set themselves free from painful obligation, if by so doing they bring the name they represent upon the common tongues of the crowd. This is the sense of the old *noblesse oblige*. We do not belong only to ourselves. We are a part of the honour of our nations. When we do anything on the spur of personal passion or personal injury, which brings those whose name we bear into disrepute, we are faithless to our traditions and our trusts.’

She sighed heavily, and the tears rolled off her lashes down her cheeks. She knew that he was right ; no appeal to dignity and honour could leave untouched the inmost chords of the heart of John Vernon’s daughter.

‘I will never do anything to lower his name myself,’ she said, with emotion. ‘Never, let me suffer what I may.’

‘Of that I am sure,’ replied Aubrey; ‘but without thought you have done what must inevitably draw the comment and the censure of the world upon you both.’

‘Not I. It was not my fault, though I have taken all blame for it. He had left me openly for her; he had resolved to do so before I set foot in Naples.’

‘It need never have been known to the world in general if you had continued to be the mistress of his houses, and with time you might have regained his affections.’

A hot blush of deepest anger scorched up the tears upon her cheeks. ‘I could not live like that; I would not exist a day in such hypocrisy and degradation.’

‘Why will you talk of death, my dear? you will outlive me and Guilderoy by many years. You are hardly more than a child still.’

‘And do not children die? It is true death never takes those who wish for it; and I am always well—cruelly well—absurdly well!’

‘That is ungrateful to fate, my dear. Would you be happier if you were lying on a sick bed, paralysed with bodily pains torturing you, as well as mental?’

‘It would be a less harsh contrast. Oh, yes! I know that I am thankless, ungracious, wicked, I dare say; but when I feel such perfect health in me, such untiring strength, I wonder what are the use of them, why they stay with me, why they could not make my little children strong enough too, so that they might have lived. His sister always says it was my fault that they died. I do not think it was.’

‘Yes; I wish your children had lived. You would not have severed your life from his then?’

‘Oh, yes, I should. I should have done just the same; only I should have had them with me. He would not have taken them away from me. I heard him say once that a man was a brute who could take her children from any woman, at any age, whatever the law might allow to him.’

Aubrey looked at her in surprise.

‘My dear, when you can recognise qualities and feelings in him like this, why did you not have more patience with him? Human nature cannot give unalloyed excellence, and human affections should not expect it. In what we love we are sure to find grave faults, and faults which often are of the kind which we of all others most disparage; but we must accept them just as we would accept blindness or lameness, or any physical accident in the person we loved.’

‘That depends on the character of the faults.’

‘Does it not rather depend on our own character? I admit that what is vile or utterly false and feeble will kill affection,

because it destroys the very roots in which it is planted. But the infidelities of the passions and the waywardness of the instincts are not sins so dark as to be unpardonable ; they are, indeed, faults almost inseparable from manhood.'

She looked at him wistfully.

'You would be faithful to any woman you loved, I think?'

'There is no question of myself,' said Aubrey impatiently. 'I have had no time for the soft follies of life, and my mistress is England, who is a very exacting one. The question under consideration now is of my cousin. His offences against you are very grave ; but they are of a kind which you must have learned enough in these years to know are inseparable from such a temperament as his, and which I think every woman should force herself to overlook.'

'If she felt herself in the least loved by him or necessary to him, yes,' she answered, with force and emotion. 'All the question lies there. If he had ever loved me I might believe that he might care for me more or less again. But I knew—I knew almost at once—that he never did. As far as he can love at all he loves her. I am nothing to him but a person who is in the way ; who prevents him from marrying her ; who encumbers his life and draws down unpleasant comments on him from the world. You cannot alter that. There is nothing to touch or to appeal to in it.'

'I think that you mistake, that you exaggerate. Look in your mirror, and see if you are a woman to whom a man so susceptible to female charms as he is, can ever be wholly indifferent.'

She smiled sadly, with that premature knowledge of the world which had so embittered her life with its disillusion.

'If I were a stranger or a mere acquaintance I should have charm for him perhaps. Surely, my friend, you must understand that, being what I am to him, I have none.'

He looked at her again ; they were walking by the edge of the cliff behind the house in one of the rare hours in which he permitted himself to visit her. It was a rough, rude day, with boisterous winds and a high sea tumbling black and frothy far down below them. The mists hung heavily over the inland landscape, and all the northern horizon, where the woods of Ladysrood were, was hidden by a white thick fog. But on the table-land of the cliffs the breeze was blowing strongly, and it gave warmth to her cheeks and brilliancy to her eyes, and blew some of the short waves of her hair in disorder upon her forehead. The wind, and the cold, and the air from the sea, lent her a vividness of colouring and of expression which for the moment banished the gloom and sadness which were now habitual on her face.

‘If he could see her now,’ thought Aubrey, ‘surely he would come back to her.’

He turned his own eyes from her and gazed out over the stormy sea, afraid of the emotions into which he might be hurried.

His position grew daily more and more difficult as sole counsellor and friend of the deserted wife of his own cousin; more and more painful to himself and invidious before others. Though passion had had little place in his life, his nature was far from passionless, and he realised that the time might come when it would be impossible to him longer to preserve this attitude of calm, paternal affection towards her.

With all the unconsciousness of a woman whose thoughts and feelings are centred elsewhere, she unwittingly tempted him and tortured him a hundred times an hour. The very pleasure with which she welcomed him, the sense she often expressed to him that he was her one consolation and protection, the instinct of confidence in which she turned to and leaned on him in her loneliness, appealed more than any other thing could have done to a man of his merciful and magnanimous temperament. But they also tried his self-control more cruelly than any other things, and often made him dread that his voluntarily accepted office would be one beyond his force.

All the public obligations and national interests with which his life was filled, although they gave him that hold on duty and on honour which it would have been a crime in his eyes to relax, his position before the country being the conspicuous one which it was, they yet could not still in him either the rebellion of chained passions or the natural yearnings of the heart.

He was a man of higher principle and stronger force of self-denial than most; but he was also a man of warmer feeling than most, and his love had never been weakened by being divided and frittered away in such innumerable amours as had swayed in their turn the fancies of Guilderoy. All the grave and absorbing claims upon his life from his party and his country could not prevent his unspoken attachment to his cousin’s wife growing daily and hourly in influence on him. But he had strength to keep it untold, for he felt that any expression of it would destroy the serenity of trust with which she looked to him in all things, and would alarm her, dismay her, and leave her utterly alone.

He was her only friend; for all others whom she knew had fallen from her. Her life was dreary and dangerous as it was. With none to whom she could show her aching heart, it would become to her, he knew, a solitude beyond the strength of any woman so young to endure. She herself had that oblivion of possible calumny and of the imputation of low motives which

is at once the strength and the feebleness of noble natures, and leaves them exposed to the false constructions of those who, unheeded by them, observe them with malevolence and coarseness : such malevolence and such coarseness as are always the foundations of the superficial judgments of society. She did not think for a moment of any possible misconstruction of that kindly and honest affection which Aubrey had shown her ever since he had first met her in the little Watteau cabinet at Guilderoy House the day after her first Drawing-room. He had been always there to serve her in any difficulty, to counsel her in any distress ; it was natural that he should come to her now in her solitude.

It seemed to her strange that he came so little ; it seemed even unkind and unjust. She accused him in her thoughts of leaning to his cousin's side, of being so swayed by family considerations of pride and sympathy of kindred that he palliated and excused his cousin's conduct to an extent which was injustice to herself. Woman-like, she required in her friend unlimited approval and undivided sentiment ; she wanted to hear him tell her that she had done wholly right, was wholly to be pitied and esteemed. The slightest reservation in sympathy struck on her aching heart as with the cold severity of censure.

It made him afraid for her sake to assume any prominence in her affairs or to take that part on her behalf with his cousin which it would have been his natural impulse to take. Neither Guilderoy nor the world would ever have credited him with the unselfish feelings which would have been his only motive power. He saw no way in which he could assist without more greatly injuring her. He knew, too, that it was likely enough they would associate his own name with the causes of her voluntary retirement ; and he was conscious that every step he took, and every word he spoke in her protection or defence, would only create more strongly the impression that he in some way or another controlled her destinies.

Nor did he disguise from her that all his family blamed her ; even his sister blamed her. They were intolerant of a publicity and eccentricity which they could not conceal from society, and of which with more or less undisguised inquisitiveness the world around them wearied them incessantly for the explanation. They felt all the impatience of a proud and sensitive race at the needless wonder and conjecture which were aroused by her retirement to her father's cottage. It had caused a public scandal where the world need have known nothing of the differences between herself and her husband.

True, she herself knew that Guideroy had left her never to return to her, and that such total separation from her had been the price put by her rival on her re-acceptance of his vows ;

but they did not know this, and, had they known it, would have thought it a mere delirium on his part which would pass away with time and with indulgence. They would have censured him strongly, but they would not have deemed her justified by his conduct in taking such a course as gave her name to the whole world to tear in pieces in the excitement of its curiosity and baffled interrogation. The view which Hilda Sunbury took of her action was in the main the view of all those powerful families with which Guilderoy was connected, whether closely or distantly, by blood or alliance. They defended him because he belonged to them ; and they visited her with their displeasure because they thought, as his sister did, that she had been grossly at fault throughout, that she had never known how to obtain any influence over him, and that, having confirmed his faults by over-leniency to them in the first years of their marriage, she had now injured him by severity and severance when both were ill-timed and misunderstood.

Though often when she was alone the conscience of Hilda Sunbury smote her, remembering the last words which she had heard John Vernon speak to her, yet in society she did not hesitate to exculpate her brother at his wife's cost. She did not scruple to hint, with many adroit phrases, at incompatibility of temper, want of sympathy, coldness of feeling, which excused if they did not justify Guilderoy's indifference.

'I say nothing ; I blame no one,' she replied continually to her questioners ; but there was a tone in the words which implied a more injurious censure than any direct accusation would have done.

And when Aubrey, angered and in earnest, told something of the truth, and took up the defence of his cousin's wife, society listened to him with apparent deference because he was a great person in more ways than one and a leader of opinion, both social and political ; but, in his absence, smiled and said that he had always been her friend, always been conspicuously attendant on her from the earliest days of her appearance in the world. Without the voices of the women of his House raised on her behalf, he could do but little in her service ; and they, at their friendliest, thought of her as the Duchess of Longleat did, who said one day to him :

'If she would come and stay with me, if she would hold her own at Ladysrood, if she would lead any natural life so that the world need not talk, I would support her in every way. But as long as she buries herself in this ridiculous isolation, as long as she virtually blames herself by her acceptance of an utterly invidious position, I can do nothing for her even if I wished. You say that Guilderoy leaves her ; it may be so ; but to all appearance it is she who leaves him. You say that



she has voluntarily given up her place in his life and all her rights ; I do not doubt you, but there is certainly every appearance that it is he who has refused them to her for some just cause : I say just because, were it unjust, she would most certainly protest. I have always been attached to her ; first because she pleased you, and then because she pleased me myself ; but she has placed herself in an absurdly false position, even accepting your account of the causes which have led to it, and I do not see what anyone can possibly do to sustain her in it.'

'I thought you more generous and less conventional,' said Aubrey, angered deeply, 'and I think that when I give you my word that her conduct has not only been blameless but admirable, you might trust me enough to believe in my assurance.'

'My dear, I do not doubt that you give it in perfect good faith,' said his sister. 'Who could doubt your good faith who knows you ? But you have always been infatuated about her—pardon me the word—and I confess that I think your chivalry is doing her, in her present position, infinitely more harm than good. If she will come and stay with me I will receive her. What more can I say ? I have always been greatly her friend. But so long as she condemns herself in society's opinion by living alone in a little cottage where she is only visible to you, no one can be of any solid service to her. You say that Evelyn is living openly with the Duchess Soria. It may be so. But the world does not believe it, because the Duchess Soria is a woman wise enough always to please and pamper the world ; and even if it be ever generally known, everyone will declare that Lady Guilderoy could have only one of two courses open to her—either to carry her case to the tribunals, which is what vulgar women do, or else to go on her usual routine as if she saw nothing and heard nothing, which is what women who are gentlewomen do all their lives long.'

'It is what she is doing.'

'No ; what she is doing is a romantic, headstrong, idiotic thing with which you have great sympathy, but with which no one else living will ever have the slightest patience. She is drawing the whole world's attention down upon her, and no woman can ever do that without being condemned by it. When the season comes, and she is not in her house in town, not in her place at Court, not in her position in society, not in her home of Ladysrood, and everyone knows that she is living alone in the cottage her father died in, what do you suppose that society in general will say ?'

'If it can ever say the truth by any miracle, it will say that she is so living because she is too sensitive and too proud to accept the maintenance of a man who is unfaithful to her without secrecy or excuse.'

'No; the world will say nothing of the sort, for it does not believe in miracles. It will take the side which is popular; it always takes the side which is popular, and you know it does; it will exonerate Guilderoy, because it has never liked her; and, being essentially vulgar, which all society is in our day, it will utterly refuse to credit that any woman voluntarily surrenders all the material pleasures of a great income and a great position. When all our maidens are brought up only to think life worth living if they can sell themselves for those, who will be likely to hear with patience that Gladys alone of her sex despises them? You know, as well as I do, that though you proclaimed it in Westminster Hall with sound of trumpets, you would not find any living creature to believe you.'

'I supposed that *you* would believe me,' said Aubrey with great anger and some emotion.

Ermyntrude Longleat looked at him with tenderness and anxiety.

'I have not said that I do not, my dearest. But I know her intimately, and I know that her education has given her that unworldliness and unwisdom which always appear either a crime or a lunacy to the world at large. I believe her motives to be what you say; but I think the act they have resulted in is deplorable. It must make the breach between her and Guilderoy irrevocable. You seem to me to remember that too little. You forget that after all we are his relatives, not hers; and in my opinion her first obligation was to him, not to her own pride. You would see this as I see it if your feelings were not biassed by strong personal interest in her which blinds you to common facts. Forgive me, dear, if I have said too much.'

'It is precisely because we are his relatives, not hers, that common justice and common honour call on us to defend her against him,' said Aubrey, passing over her latter words. 'Guilderoy requires neither pity nor support; he does what he pleases; he would always do what he pleased if the whole world were burning. He leaves his wife much as he would any *cocotte*. He offers a different price, it is true. He has told his lawyers to give her half his income. But the feeling which governs him is the same as if he were paying off a woman he wanted no more. He deems himself *quitte par la bourse*.'

'And she refuses?'

'She refuses. She will live on the little her father left her. I confess I am amazed that such a choice in so young a woman does not move you to admiration.'

'I cannot admire what is making the whole of society talk ill of a person who is related to me.'

'You speak as if he were blameless.'

'No; but if every woman in our world made such an *esclandre* as she, society would be at an end.'

'She has made none. She has simply withdrawn herself to the life that she led before marriage.'

'And pray, what is that but a public separation?'

'It is a separation certainly, but not a public one. It would be utterly ignoble if, because we are closely connected with him, we upheld him against a wholly innocent woman. She may not have acted judiciously, but she has most certainly acted as only a wholly innocent woman would act; and she is as entirely sacrificed to him as if he had killed her in the flesh as he has in the spirit.'

His sister listened to him with sorrow and apprehension.

'I hope to heaven you will not be sacrificed to her in turn!' she thought, but she forebore to say it.

Aubrey was disappointed and angered at her want of sympathy, and took his leave of her, failing for the first time in their lives to influence her by his opinions and his desires.

Knowing the world profoundly as he did, he divined all that the world was saying of Gladys, not in his hearing indeed, nor in that of any member of his family, but nevertheless saying unsparingly, inevitably, with all its inexhaustible powers of exaggeration and invention. Who beside himself and the few who knew her intimately would believe in the story as she told it, in the motives as she gave them?

When her position was a target for the arrows of slander, how could she escape them? Who would believe in the pride and indignation of a character, still so childlike in its impulses and so unworldly in its estimates, that it could avenge its wrongs by stripping itself of every material advantage and every pleasure and pomp of life?

Her choice was one of those things which the world will to the day of judgment utterly refuse to credit, because, breaking all its canons and ignoring all its estimates, they afford to it no kind of common ground on which their motives can be judged.

Aubrey knew that; and he knew that it would be as likely a task to persuade geese hissing on a common of the beauty of a sunrise as to induce the mass of society to give credence to the reasons which had led her to return to the house at Christ'slea.

It was an exaggerated sentiment, and when some idea of what she had done was bruited about in society it was called morbid and mad by the few who did not go still farther and say that she had been forced to do it by her husband on the discovery of her attachment to his cousin. It was an unwise act; unwise with that mingling of sublimity and folly which characterises most acts of any strong feeling. She seemed by it to give colour and ground to the conjectures raised against her; it was an error which none but a very young and a very proud woman would have made.

The money which her father had inherited, and which had come in due course to her, Guilderoy had immediately secured to her in such a manner that it was her own as absolutely as if she had never married. Under her marriage settlements her father had been her only trustee; and his sudden death had left her sole mistress of her actions. Vernon had never felt the least anxiety as to her safety in her husband's hands with regard to all material welfare. Guilderoy was at all times not only generous but scrupulous in the observance of all obligations of that kind, and had never had the slightest disorder in his personal affairs. What he had once promised in the little study at Christlea on this point he had thoroughly and blamelessly fulfilled. She was, therefore, so placed now that no one except himself could have any legal title to interfere in her actions, and he did not seek to interfere.

It angered him deeply, it oppressed and humiliated him, to know that his wife was living on her own resources in a little cottage ten miles off his own country house. He was well aware of how the whole world of their acquaintances would speak of so strange a thing, and of how many and how strained would be the constructions placed upon it. But he did not endeavour to prevent it. He felt that he had wronged her too much to have any mortal right to dictate to her. It seemed to him that only a cur could exercise the power given him by the law when he had voluntarily declined the power given him by the affections. To attempt to dictate to his wife when he had abandoned her would have appeared to him the very basest depth of low breeding.

Her choice embarrassed and pained him; it made him feel forsworn in all the promises which he had given to provide for her material welfare; it rendered the memory of John Vernon doubly reproachful to him. He knew that it must emphasise and darken his own acts in the sight of his relatives and his society in general. To a man like him, who was always careful to atone for moral unkindness to women by great care for their material welfare, and who looked on them as beautiful and delicate animals which needed luxury and shelter as racers did, it was intensely distressing to think that the woman whom he had made the bearer of his name should be living in a manner which to him seemed scarcely above penury. His pride was hurt by it; both his pride of place and that higher kind of pride which goes with all the sentiments of a gentleman. He never dreamed that the world would blame her, as it did do, instead of himself, and he felt that he must appear in its sight a brute who not only wronged but defrauded his wife. He was very far from imagining that the capriciousness of society would transfer all its blame from him to her. Knowing the world as he did, such inversion of it never occurred to him as possible.

But Gladys had never had the favour of her world. All her courtesies, her generousities, her many thoughtful and tender-hearted acts had failed to atone for the unconscious hauteur of her manner and the tacit rebuke which her silence was to the amusements around her. She had had at all times as her enemies the many women who had loved and had lost Guilderoy, and their voices in the earliest days of her début had set the current of feeling against her.

Rumour excused his weaknesses and distorted her failings. The Duchess Sorla was beloved and followed by the great world. It had never condemned, it would always be very slow to condemn her. It would unquestionably hesitate to see anything harmful in any of her friendships; and it would as certainly refuse to believe that any woman of years so youthful as those of Gladys would voluntarily and innocently retire into the poverty of a rural and obscure life.

The world has its own reasons for believing and for disbelieving; the facts of any case do not enter into these, nor in any way affect them. There are those who can do no wrong in its sight, and these have a charter of infallibility; there are others who can do nothing to its taste, and these are condemned even before they act.

Then not a few also were envious of what was considered her monopoly of such a man as Aubrey. His great position and reputation made him the desire and the despair of many; and when it was seen how much time he could find to give to his cousin's young wife, though for no other dalliance of the sort had he leisure, there had never been wanting those who were ready to suggest that his attentions to Lady Guilderoy had as their ultimate object something much less innocent than the mere pleasantness of family regard.

The proud and the delicate disdain the favour of the world, but they pay heavily for their disdain. The favour of the world makes us walk on the sunny side of the street, gives us a south aspect to our house of life, sweeps the dust and the mud from the paths we tread, and when we set sail from any port sends us favouring winds and smiling seas. She had never had that pliability and popularity which give a woman in a difficult position the support of a thousand friends who make common cause with her. That rare high-breeding and that delicate hauteur which had marked her actions and her manner in the world had made her many enemies. There were few other women in European society who would not be gratified to think that proud young head was humbled. He could hear, as though he were present at them, the million and one different conversations in which the fact of her separation from her husband would be discussed, accounted for, embroidered on, censured, and ridiculed, all by turns.

No one wrote to her or came to her except her one friend.

The world will always let anyone fall out of its favour who chooses to do so. She had made none of those intimacies with women which give a woman sympathy and support. She had been disdainful of the society of her own sex; to her mind, used to communion with such intelligences as her father's and Aubrey's, feminine conversation and confidences seemed trivial and frivolous. Men who had admired her despite her coldness, and would gladly have atoned to her for her husband's neglect had she given them the slightest sign of permission, were afraid to seek her out in her solitude because of the generally credited report that Aubrey was primarily responsible for her selection of it. He was not a man with whom other men cared to meddle. The very coldness and indifference to women of his life hitherto made it generally supposed that his dedication of himself to his cousin's wife argued some deep mutual attraction which would not brook any interference.

It was altogether in vain that he in real truth saw her seldom, was careful to do nothing which could give grounds for calumny, and made his visits to her of brief duration. The world only saw in such scrupulous care the secrecy and the consciousness of a concealed intrigue which his public career made it necessary to conduct with the most delicate observance of appearances. 'It is nothing new; he was always in love with her,' said men and women both; and it seemed to them all as clear as daylight that it was the origin of Guilderoy's abandonment of her. He had discovered what he did not choose to condone, no doubt, and so had exiled her to her father's house in preference to seeking any more public remedy. He and Aubrey were near relatives. Their families were proud. Of course the matter had been arranged thus for the sake of peace and of the avoidance of the country's disapprobation; the attitude of Lady Sunbury and her ominous silence made them certain that this was the truth of the whole position. They blamed Aubrey more than they blamed Guilderoy.

The latter had always been frankly a man of pleasure, *un homme léger*; he had never assumed any serious attitude before the nation. But Aubrey was a politician of distinction and of immense influence; that he should cause any scandal of the sort seemed an offence against the country itself; a kind of immorality which was almost a treachery to it. 'And his cousin's wife, too!' they cried, 'and a woman so young!' All the great ladies who had had histories in their own lives, and all the fashionable *femmes tarées* who kept their footing with difficulty in society, were so shocked that they could not bring themselves to speak of it. And a Scotch waiting-woman who had taken service with a Scotch marchioness of very strict religious

opinions sighed and hinted that she had left Lady Guilderoy's service because even at that time Lord Aubrey had been more intimate in his cousin's house than her principles had permitted her to countenance. 'I am a poor woman who work for my bread, my lady,' said the good creature, 'and I have five small children dependent on my earnings; but let me suffer what I might, I could never consent to prosper by taking the wages of sin.'

'Your feelings and your scruples do you very great honour,' said her employer, who was of a different political party to that of which Aubrey was a leader.

And little by little the impression grew into a certainty with the world that Guilderoy, however blamable, had had much cause to blame others, and to leave the country.

## CHAPTER LI.

THE delicately good taste of Beatrice Sorìa had made it easy for the high society of Europe to see nothing, if it chose to see nothing, blamable in the renewed intimacy between her and Guilderoy. Theirs was one of those positions, they are not rare, in which the popularity or the unpopularity of the persons concerned wholly determines the amount of indulgence or of censure which they shall receive from others. Tact goes for much in this, and distinction for much. The great lady does unblamed what the woman of yesterday would be stoned for attempting. There is a sublime nonchalance and a calm superiority to calumny which repel it utterly, much more effectually than any mere virtue. The world but asks from us external observances: if we do not give these, we are such fools that we merit that sentence of banishment from it which is as terrible as the fiat of exile to Ovid. Beatrice Sorìa had always been heedful to give those observances, not from want of courage, for she had great courage, but from good breeding. It seemed to her vulgar to put out your passions in the street, as the poor hang their soiled linen. It is enough for you to know your own happiness; you do not want the crowd to see the rose hung above your portal.

She had made it her condition that he should now leave his wife utterly for her sake, because it seemed to her that nothing less than that could atone to her for his abandonment of herself, could reconcile her to her own lost dignity, or ensure her against a merely partial offering of his life such as would have

seemed to her at once an insolence and a humiliation. 'I alone, or nothing!' she had said, as every woman says it, although so few have power to enforce it. It had been the only means by which she had been able to test the sincerity of his regret and the loyalty of his return.

True, she had sacrificed to it an innocent woman; but it was only natural that the fulness of her own triumph had weighed more with her than any memory of her rival's misery. Like all great conquerors, she felt that it was not for her to heed or to pause for the fallen.

She was in no way a cruel woman, but she felt the contempt felt by all women who have great dominion over men for those who cannot attain equal power over them.

'She has loveliness, and youth, and many rare qualities of both heart and mind, and yet she can only sigh and suffer because he is faithless!' she had often thought with wondering disdain of Gladys as she had studied her in society.

She allowed nothing in their apparent intercourse which could give rise to any scandal, except such as must be inevitably caused by his continued residence in Italy. She made him live in his own houses, visit her with precaution, and never publicly presume upon his relations to her. It was her wisdom as well as her good taste which influenced her. She knew the truth that

*Dulci ferimur : succo renovamur amaro ;*

and she did not allow their intimacy to be degraded into a too facile habit which would inevitably have become with time careless and over-sure.

She knew his nature and the temperament of men too well to allow him that too constant access to happiness which soon results in making such happiness insipid and unenjoyed. All the faults which had cost her so dear in her first association with him she avoided now; and even still at times he was so doubtful of his influence over her, despite all the proofs he had of it, that he asked himself uneasily whether his surrender to her had not been demanded by her rather through pride than love. It was the uncertainty, the stimulant, the mortification, which were needful to sustain at its strength the passion of a man whose conquests had been as easy as his caprices, and had been short-lived.

'Even now I do not believe that you love me as you used to do!' he said to her more than once.

She smiled. 'What is love?' she said dreamily. 'Sometimes I think it is the most absurd and the basest feeling of our lives; and sometimes I think it is the only spark of immortality which we ever have in us.'



‘It seems to me immortal when I look on you,’ he answered; and he was sincere in what he said.

All these months had passed with him in a happiness which had been more nearly the ideal happiness of his early dreams than any he had ever known. His re-conquest of her glorious physical beauty and the potent and subtle charm of her intelligence exercised a sway over him which was deeper and more enduring than the first passion which she had excited in him. The amorous spell which lies in the climate of the country which had always been the land of his preference, and the easy languor of life in it, added to the spell of her influences upon him. He marvelled how ever he could have been mad enough to leave her; he wondered how he had passed years of his existence without her. Either warned by her previous loss of him, or calmed by the greatness and completeness of her triumph, or perchance bringing now into her relations with him as much of wisdom as she had once brought of passion, she gave him all the loveliness of love without its exactions and its violence. She bent all the varied resources of her mind, which were infinite, and all the powers of her seductions, which were endless, to prove to him all that he had missed in missing her, all which no other woman on earth could give to him; and she succeeded. She succeeded, now that it was a matter with her rather of supremacy, and pride, and triumph, than of love, where she had failed when it had been to her a thing of life and of death, on which all her soul had been cast. Passion serves women ill: it makes their eyes blind, their steps rash, their acts unwise; and unselfishness in love serves them still worse. Desire of dominion, on the contrary, is their most safe and subtle servant, placing illimitable power in their hands, and leaving their sight clear to use it in their own interest as they will.

Beatrice Soria had been a better woman when he had thought her a worse one, a tenderer woman when he had thought her a more violent one; her heart still beat for him, but no more with the rash, ardent, delirious warmth of earlier days. Dominant over her impulses of revived passion was a colder and more egotistic intent to make him and to keep him once more wholly hers.

In the autumn of the year, Guilderoy was for a while in Venice, nominally living at his own palazzino there, whilst she was at one of the villas on the Brenta, which she had inherited as part of her mother’s dower; one of those marvels of art and architecture which stand amidst the gladiolus-filled marshes and the green mulberry-shaded pastures of the Veneto, so little known, so rarely visited, but as much memorials of the greatness and luxury of the Venetian patricians as are the

streets of the city herself. In early autumn, when the rose and white pomea is in flower in all the hedges, and the last after-math is mown in the meadows, and the barges come down the river laden with purple and yellow grapes, and the marvellous sunsets burn over the wide-spreading waters, and the little grey owls flit under the poplar shadows, these villas on the Brenta form as lovely a retreat as the world can offer; and the gaiety and the pagantry of Goldoni and of Carpaccio seem to be renewed, and the lovely ladies and the gay gallants of Rosalba and of Longhi seem to live again in them.

For the most part they are, unhappily, abandoned to neglect, decay, and silence; but in hers the animation, the brilliancy, and the courtliness which her society brought thither were worthy of the traditions of Catarina Corner, the adored and adorable, who once had held her court there.

Guilderoy was little in the city, much at the villa, and the days were long and light and sensuous and soft as the music of Gretry, which had used to echo over those waters and down those marble colonnades in the days of Madame Cattina.

One of the most potent seductions of Beatrice Soria lay in the forms of life with which she surrounded herself. The atmosphere in which a woman lives stimulates, or kills, love for her as much as does her person or her mind. Even one who is not beautiful derives a certain reflection of beauty from beautiful surroundings; and where she has ever about her pleasure, grace, and gaiety, she will have in them strong auxiliaries to charm and retain those whom she desires to please. The varied and brilliant existence which she created by her magnificent modes of living, and her unusual wit, made her houses wholly unlike any other. 'You alone know how to live!' some one said to her once; and she thought sadly, 'Yes; I know how to live; it is much, no doubt. But how to exorcise that spirit of dissatisfaction which dulls all sooner or later would be more—how—how? It has perplexed and baffled every voluptuary and every artist since the world began!' She interrogated in vain the shades of the great pleasure-seekers and the glad lovers who had passed down those marble staircases and under those canopies of trellised vine before her, in the days that were dead,

Sulle rive d'Adria bella.

Men had always been her playthings; she had done whatever she had chosen with them; but she had always felt for them that indolent, indulgent, and yet at times impatient derision with which a woman of high intelligence and profound passions is apt to regard both her lovers and her friends.

And in her, now, besides this, was a vague, slight, very vague, very slight, sense of disappointment.

Was it because she failed to feel those intensities of emotion which she had felt before? Was it because no one summer is like another? Was it because the mind and nature change with time, and what is delightful and exquisite in one season cannot wholly content them in another? Or was it because the passions are such subtle, self-willed, and mysterious agents of our being that they resist the appeal to them to build in last year's nests? She could not tell; all the penetration and intuition of her intelligence and experience did not suffice to explain to her why this vague, faint sense of disappointment followed on the renewal of her romance.

It was no fault of his.

He was the most devoted and the most tender of lovers. It was perhaps that her memory and her imagination had expected more than it was humanly possible for any love to give from their reunion; or perhaps she unconsciously missed the stimulant of that desire to regain his affections which had moved all her strongest feelings since his marriage. She had nothing more left to wish for; in the full, rich, and pampered life of Beatrice Sorla that fact was almost a loss in itself. She felt for him tenderly and with warmth indeed; but it was not the same feeling as had subjugated all her soul and her senses in the first days of its ascendancy.

'Perhaps I grow old, and so indifferent,' she thought; but then she looked in her mirror and smiled, and knew that it was not that.

Was it then the inevitable reaction of expectations too great for finite human passions to fulfil them? Was it that the lost music had seemed so sweet in its remembrance that no strain of it, heard now, could ever seem to equal it in melody? 'I loved him better when he was not mine,' she thought sometimes with the saddest consciousness which can ever visit love. Alas! it is not an unfrequent visitant.

Coming down the Grand Canal one early forenoon, when the pressure of gondolas there was greater than usual owing to some Church festival, his own was jostled between two others and had to pause in its outward voyage while the rival rowers exchanged the usual maledictions with uplifted oars and infinite variety of florid oaths. He heard his own name spoken by one of two men who were sketching in a gondola tied to one of the piles before a water-gate. They were making drawings of all that is left of the Falier palace, and of its little garden court and wooden wicket; they were painters well known in the artistic world of London, and they recognised him as he passed.

'Where is his wife, do you know?' said one of them. 'She

was a lovely creature. You remember Leighton's portrait of her three years ago.'

'She is always living alone in a little house on the sea-coast, I believe,' replied the other.

'Separated, then?'

'Yes, virtually. Lord Aubrey consoles her, I believe. Some people say that he always did.'

'Aubrey? The Minister?'

'The man who was Minister in the last Administration, yes. There is only one. He is this man's cousin.'

'The relationship gave him opportunities, I suppose?'

The other artist laughed; and they both went on with their drawing of the little acacia-tree by the green gate of the court of the Falieri.

Guilderoy felt a strange emotion as his gondola, extricated, passed on its way towards the Lido. There was no truth, he knew, in this foolish gossiping; and yet it wounded, offended, and irritated him.

As the vessel passed outward on its way towards the lagoon, he, lying back on his black cushions, could not shake off the rough unpleasant impression of the words which he had overheard. Was this how they were talking of him in England? Such a possibility had never come before his thoughts before.

He had actually and morally set his wife as free as though his death had released her from him. He did not believe that Aubrey had as yet become her lover, but he suddenly realised that it was a possibility which was more than possible. It did not find him indifferent. It touched that sensitive nerve in him which men call honour for want of a clearer name for it, though it is in truth rather personal pride and love of dignity than honour.

It suddenly awakened the image of Gladys from that dim forgotten past into which it had retreated, and restored her to a place, not in his heart indeed, but in his memories and in his susceptibilities.

She had seemed to him scarcely more than a shade as she had last appeared before him in the ghastly and pallid hues of the dreamlike chambers of his Neapolitan palace, an avenging shape arisen to reproach him and to curse him; but now she became more than this; he realised that she was a living woman of breathing life and motion, who had it in her power, if she chose, to return him the harm that he had done to her by a vengeance which would touch him to the quick and humble him in the eyes of all men.

And why should she not do it? If she did, could he honestly blame her?

He knew he could not.

Why should he demand from a young and lonely woman a force of self-control of which his own strength and manhood had been incapable? The consciousness oppressed and haunted him with a vague dread. He remembered the warning Aubrey had given him, *Nil Helena peccat*. Had his cousin meant to give him in it a personal and not a general advertisement of impending possible ill? Had Aubrey, with his habitual candour, meant to say to him, 'What you do not care to guard I shall consider that I am at liberty to approach as I may choose.' He knew the loyalty and frankness of his cousin's character; it would, he knew, be very like him that on the eve of a prohibited attachment he should frankly endeavour to warn and place on his defence the man whose honour would be involved.

It was a beautiful afternoon as his boatmen took him, a few hours later, up the Brenta water, through the sparkling sunshine. The leaves were yellow on the poplars, and the trees looked made of gold. The wide green meadows were bathed in light. The thatch-roofs of the cottages looked like the brown nests of big birds amongst the ever-flowering foliage. Huge barges and flat-bottomed boats, with painted sails leaning motionless on the lazy air, passed him laden with grapes and gourds, amber pears and rosy-cheeked apples. The far hills were sweet and fair with all the colours of the opal and the amethyst in them. But the beauty of the scene was lost on him.

He was thinking ever of the *Nil Helena peccat*.

When he reached the water-stairs of the villa, with steps of marble shelving down into the bulrushes and yellowing water-lily leaves, the day had grown dark. It was the hour of reunion in the great central hall, with columns and sculptures of Sansovino and a domed ceiling, where frescoes of Tiepolo's were lost in the immense height of the vault. Its owner was accustomed to gather her guests about her there before dinner in the autumn evenings, when the great olive and oak logs burning on the enormous hearth under its porphyry caryatides had a welcome warmth as the cold vapours of night succeeded to the warm sunshine of the passed day.

He felt out of mood for that gay circle; for once, when he had changed his clothes and joined it, the brilliant gathering, where the men had the wit of Carlo Gozzi and the women the beauty of Teresa Venier, jarred upon him in its brilliancy and mirth.

'You have taken a chill on the water,' some one said to him; he answered absently, 'No—yes—perhaps.'

Much later in the evening Beatrice Soria herself noticed his preoccupation.

'You have heard something which displeases you of your

wife,' she mused, for her quick intuitions let her read the souls of men, even in their secrecies, like open books.

She had taken means to inform herself of the manner in which Gladys had chosen to live, though her name had never once been mentioned between them.

To Beatrice Soria she was a woman beaten, forsaken, indifferent, insignificant; she pitied her and never spoke of her. But, she mused, it was so like a man because he had deserted her to think of her, even to think of her regretfully! Men were such children; such weak, wayward, fearful children, as she had said once on the banks of the Thames to Aubrey: always wanting that which they have not, always regretting their own actions when it is too late to efface them, always putting the blame upon fate which is due to their own folly, caprice, or instability!

The excuse is always 'The woman tempted me and I did eat' in the wilderness of the world as in the Garden of Eden.

'You are ill at ease and out of spirits,' she said as she passed him. 'Do not look so; people will say that I tyrannise over you; nothing is more absurd than that.'

'I cannot tutor my looks,' he answered with impatience. 'Perhaps I am not well. I do not know.'

They were unobserved for a moment, others were dancing. He looked at her with an imploring gaze.

'You do love me?' he added. 'Tell me again.'

'What a child you are!' she said with a smile. 'What is the use of saying what is proved?'

'But is it proved?'

'What can you possibly mean?'

'I mean, in this gorgeous life of yours, flattered, amused, and adored as you are, what room is there for any great or exclusive feeling?'

'It seems to me, my friend, that it is very late for that doubt to come to you?'

'Perhaps I am jealous. You have so many who love you, and you are too indulgent with them.'

'Do not become Othello because we are in the Veneto. It will not suit you in any way. Your love has always been *galanterie*.'

'Not always.'

'Yes, always, I think, at heart.'

'That is cruelly unjust! What greater evidence——'

Coldness and anger came into her eyes.

'Do not remind me of your sacrifices. It is very bad taste.'

'Sacrifices! Who spoke of sacrifices? I simply meant, what more could any man do than I have done?'

'I do not know, my dear, that it was so very much that you did. You were tired of your English life; what we are tired of, it does not cost much to renounce, and some people do say that it was rather your wife who renounced you, than you your wife.'

'That is utterly untrue!'

'It may be,' said Beatrice Sorìà with a gesture of entire indifference. 'I suppose you quarrelled. We will not quarrel, my dear; it is the sorriest and the meanest grave that love can ever find.'

She passed her hand lightly over his hair as she spoke, with something which was compassionate and mournful in the lingering caress.

'Now go and join those dancers and look happy. I cannot have my people think I make you otherwise than happy. In truth, you will never be happy very long, for you are life's spoilt child.'

He kissed with passionate fervour the whiteness of her arm as it was near his lips.

'You have made me as happy as a god this whole long year!'

'Then it should seem a very short year to you!' she said with her slow sweet smile, and left him to join her guests.

His eyes followed her with worship. Alone for her had he ever approached that strength and constancy of passion which is the love of the poets. It was foreign to his temperament, and ill akin to all his inconstant habits, but it had been illumined in him for her. A vague and painful sense perpetually haunted him that though he again possessed her he did not again possess her soul, that though he had renewed his position towards her, he was powerless to regain 'over her that vital ascendancy which he had once owned and had wantonly thrown away; and this doubt increased the influence she had upon him by the perpetual consciousness which he felt of uncertainty and inequality.

When he had had power to make her absolute wretchedness, to be her arbiter of fate, to cause her tortures by a day's absence, by a month's silence, by a slighting word or by a careless homage taken elsewhere, he had been indifferent to his power and often also too indifferent to her pain. But now their positions were reversed; he did not feel for an instant that he was vitally necessary to her; he did feel that she was life and death to him and mistress in the uttermost sense of all his fate.

## CHAPTER LII.

A FEW days later Guilderoy sent to one of his men of business to come to Venice. There was an intricate question pending in England affecting some leases on one of his estates which afforded reason enough to summon his land-agent to a personal conference. When the matter had been discussed in its financial and legal aspects, he inquired as carelessly as he could :

‘And what of Lady Guilderoy? Is she well? Is she always living in the house her father had at Christslea?’

His agent answered in the affirmative, feeling on his own part considerable embarrassment, for this separation into which the law did not enter, this unexplained and unregulated severance, was little understood by any of his people.

‘And does she keep herself wholly withdrawn from the world?’ he added. ‘Does she see no one? I regret it if it is so; she is too young for such solitude.’

‘She sees no one,’ said the man of business, more and more in doubt as to what answers he should make. ‘At least Lord Aubrey comes sometimes, as no doubt your lordship knows.’

Guilderoy’s face flushed. ‘Yes, I have asked him to do so,’ he said quickly.

It was a falsehood, but it was an instinctive one to save her from suspicion.

He inquired no more.

The agent returned home with a doubt which had not before visited him that Lady Guilderoy was not so wholly innocent as she looked.

‘After all,’ thought the man, ‘she keeps him out of England, so it is she who must be to blame, there can be no doubt of that.’

Guilderoy had told Aubrey himself that it was a pity that he had not married her, and he had thought so honestly. They would have been perfectly sympathetic one to another. Yet the knowledge that these sympathies which were between them had now full leisure and free scope to be developed and indulged in any way they chose, in the absolute loneliness of Christslea, was detestable to him. After all, he thought, he could not refuse her the liberty which he had himself taken. It would have seemed to him mean and unworthy to enjoy a freedom for himself which he did not accord to her. He had the large morality, or immorality, of a man of the world; if she could console herself in any way for the disorder and desolation which



he had brought into her life, he would be a brute to grudge it to her. So he reasoned.

He had put her out of his own existence; he could not complain if she made a separate life for herself. And yet the idea of his cousin alone with her in those little quiet rooms of Christslea was disagreeable to him. She had said that she would always respect the honour of his name, but those were only words, though they might have been words sincerely meant when they were spoken. He knew that the heart of any woman once seriously involved will force her to abandon her strongest principles as the warmth of summer forces the willow and the sycamore to drop their springtime catkins. And he thought of her more than he had ever done before.

She had grown very vague to him. His memory had but seldom reverted to her. He possessed the happy faculty of being able to dismiss from his mind what he did not wish to think of; and the coldness, the harshness, and the scorn with which she had spoken to him in their last interview had hardened his heart utterly against her. But since the words of his man of business, few and trite though they were, the manner of her life came before him more painfully, more positively. The little house at Christslea and the recollection of John Vernon came to his recollection with painful clearness. He remembered the first day that he had gone thither, and been welcomed with such frank cordiality and simplicity. He had repaid the welcome ill; he knew it, and, being by nature generous, the sense of his own lack of generosity oppressed him with a sense of error which all the moralists on earth would never have succeeded in bringing home to him.

As he walked in the glad sunshine by the banks of the Brenta, he thought of Christslea as he knew that it must be then; bleak, cold, grey, cheerless, with dull angry waters, and high winds blowing through black, leafless trees, and lonely moorlands shrouded in icy mists. Winter on that coast had always been to him an unendurable and hateful thing; and yet she was living through it by deliberate choice, unaccompanied, unfriended, and alone. Nay, not always alone. She had Aubrey. Aubrey was a man of scrupulous honour he knew; but he also knew that there are hours in all the lives of those who love in which resistance and strength sleep like the tired Samson in the noon siesta. He knew, too, that his own conduct had given him no title to complain of whatever advantage any other man might take of his absence.

Aubrey was there, sometimes at least, in such familiar intercourse as solitude in the country perforce creates. The idea was not welcome to him. There had been occasionally in him a vague impatience of the high esteem in which she held

his cousin, and the comparison which she had openly drawn more than once between their manner of life. Aubrey had been indifferent to women, but women had never been indifferent to him; his person, his intellect, and his fame were all such as might well captivate a poetic and serious woman such as Gladys was, especially if united to a romantic and chivalrous devotion, aided by the auxiliaries of solitude and misfortune.

Guilderoy, who was so profoundly versed in the contradictions and intricacies of the feminine temperament, knew that there is no moment at which it is so susceptible to attachment as that in which it is bruised and bleeding from the offences and the wounds of desertion.

Well, if it were so, he told himself, he had no right to object to it, or to censure her; he had no possible title to ask her to lead a joyless, passionless existence in the full flower of her youth and her beauty. He had taken his own freedom, his own happiness as he conceived it to be; he had no right whatsoever to deny any possible compensation to her. And yet his pride was hurt at the possibility, though his affections were wholly indifferent to it.

The subject occupied his thoughts when he was alone to an extent which surprised himself, and rendered him even at times preoccupied when in society or even when alone with the woman he loved.

The letters of his sister had been so incessant and so monotonous in their perpetual invective and reproach that he had wholly ceased to reply to them, and of late had long let them lie unopened. Her reproaches had always incensed him; and now that he felt they had much reason for their outcry they were trebly irritating and distasteful to him.

But when his man of business had left him he remembered them, and broke the seals of two or three of the later ones, and glanced rapidly over their contents, passing over their oft-repeated conjurations and condemnations in search for the recurrence of his cousin's name. He found it more than once. In the last letter, which had a date of two months past, the writer wrote:

'The whole world is, I think, in accord in attributing your wife's retreat to the influence of your cousin. It may be right, it may be wrong, but it is certain that it thinks that he, much more than you, has had power to determine her selection. I give no opinion myself. Of course I always saw that he was more than commonly attached to her, but he is a man of honour, and he would not throw his name to the four winds of earth as you throw yours for the sake of any woman. Still, he is mortal, and the position he occupies is at once very dangerous and very insidious in its appeal to his sympathies. He is the

only person whom she ever sees, and the only friend who is admitted to advise her. His sister has repeatedly argued with him to induce him to see this as the world sees it; but always in vain. He appears to consider that he is the natural heir to the duties which you have declined to fulfil; to what extent do you choose him to be so? Whatever may happen, you cannot complain that it happens to you undeservedly.

He read the lines with great wrath and intolerant impatience; then tore the letter up and with it those of similar strain which had preceded it. She was always a mischief-maker; seeing what did not exist, straining at gnats, weaving ropes of moonshine, setting friend against friend, and sowing the seeds of disunion under the plausible pretext, and perhaps in the honest persuasion, that she was pleasing God and serving man. He had always known her to be like that ever since he had been of age enough to be at all observant of what she did; she was a good woman—yes—like thousands and tens of thousands of good women who have all the virtues in their own persons, but have not in their temperaments one chord of sympathy, one fibre of indulgence, one touch of that erring human nature which makes the world akin, one single impulse of that sweet and tender kindness which soothes and stills and comforts maladies which it cannot cure.

A perfectly good woman—yes—and as utterly incapable of doing any real good by her influence as though she were the vilest of her sex! How many of them there are on earth, and how many men have lived to curse them as they never curse the sinners! He threw the fragments of her letters with hatred into the waters of the canal beneath his window. He knew the irrepressible pleasure in her own accuracy of prediction, in the vindication of her own forebodings by the present facts, which had been in her, all unknown to her, while she had penned all the invectives and lamentations which had preceded and followed her introduction of Aubrey's name. Some hatred he felt against himself, whose actions had given up the fair name of Gladys to the malevolent speculation of the world and to the gratified jealousies of his sister.

He remembered her as he had seen her first in her father's garden in the late autumn afternoon, with the dog's head leaning against her knee and the red foliage of the early autumn touching her hair. What a base return he had given for that sincere and simple welcome! She had spoiled his life innocently, and he had spoiled hers criminally. Absolve himself as he would, his conscience perpetually returned to convict him of his offence. He forgot the intervening years, and only thought of her as John Vernon's daughter; the fair and innocent child of the days before her marriage. His feelings were capricious

and ephemeral, but they rarely lacked generosity, and he felt that he to her had been ungenerous; that he had not allowed enough for her youth and her inexperience, that he had brought against her ignorance all the unequal forces of worldly knowledge and trained intelligence, and that he had received her life into his hand in the mere unformed clay of girlhood only to throw it in pieces among the potsherds of calumny when it had become the full amphora of womanhood. Again and again this image of her recurred to him with increasing reproach. He felt an uneasy and restless wish to return to his own country for a moment, and to see for himself what truth there was in all these stories of Aubrey's visits to her. He did not doubt the facts; but he doubted, or, rather, he refused to believe, the construction put on them by others. Aubrey had always been her friend, he certainly would not have ceased to be so; but from friendship to love there were distances which he did not credit that his cousin would ever pass. The honour which fenced in the wives of other men had never seemed to Guilderoy a very high or impassable fence; but the honour which surrounded his own seemed to him sacred and high as heaven. Yet he thought often, and with ever-increasing irritation, of that stormy and sorrowful isolation of Christslea in the winter solstice which was again so near.

His anger deepened against her with his remorse. She had rejected all his offers, she had withdrawn herself from his home, she had brought the condemnation and observation of the world upon him by the extravagance and strangeness of her actions. So he thought and so he reasoned to himself; but all his anger could not extinguish his consciousness of having drawn her into a position which scarcely any woman of her years could possibly issue from unharmed and unslandered.

He had thought her cold, irresponsible, unsympathetic; but he had been always sensible of the fineness and purity of many qualities of her character, and he knew that they were those to which he could alone now look for self-control and self-sacrifice strong enough to bear her unharmed through such an ordeal of isolation and abandonment.

'If I could speak to her,' he thought, more than once; but that was forbidden him by ten thousand reasons. His word had been passed to the woman whom he loved; his desires had been granted him on a condition which was the more imperious because based solely on his honour; he knew that if he again broke his word to her, even though in the very smallest and slightest thing, he would fall lower than the lowest in her sight, and would be degraded beyond words in his own for ever. He had received the gifts of her life on certain terms which were a millionfold more binding on him because merely left to his own

good faith. His knowledge of Beatrice Soria told him that the meanest galley-slave at work on the quays of Naples would seem to her infinitely manlier and worthier than he if in the merest trifle he transgressed the stipulation she had made.

She had left him wholly free to accept or refuse her condition, but she had understood, and had had the right to understand, that the condition, if accepted, was inviolate. He did not reproach her for it; she could have asked no less, looking both to the past and to the future. Nor could he have said that he regretted it; for he was still happy, although one fear and one remorse assailed him; the fear that though he had again recovered his position towards her, he had never recovered his influence over her; and the remorse that he had been disloyal to the promises he had given to John Vernon.

In all his faults and follies he had been a man of delicate honour, as the world construes the conventional honour it demands of a gentleman; he had never given the world the title to deride or to disdain him; he had always been careful to keep his name out of the mud of public discussion and conjecture; and he was morbidly sensitive to the fact that for the first time in the history of his race a shadow, if not a stain, had been cast upon his name: one which might deepen and darken as the years passed away, and most probably would do so, whilst he would be powerless to efface it and would have but himself to thank for it. In the conflict of feelings which had agitated him in his last interview with his wife, he had not reflected on the innumerable consequences inevitable on his action. He had only seen, on the one side, a woman whom he passionately regretted and loved, and on the other a woman who chilled, fretted, offended, and alienated him. He had chosen between them on a natural impulse, with scarce a moment's hesitation; and he had cast hardly a thought to the many difficulties and penalties which would follow on his choice.

All his life long things had gone well with him. The most serious sorrow of it had been his repentance for his rupture with Beatrice Soria, and she had been entirely right when she had told him that all the phases of his love had been rather gallantry than passion. Deep and painful emotions were novel to him and hateful. But they now forced their way into his thoughts, and would not be gainsaid.

He knew well the estimates of men of the world; their large tolerance of many, and their intolerance of some few, things. He knew that amongst these few must be his own action in driving so young and blameless a woman as his wife into her present position. He knew that his contemporaries, however elastic in judgment, must be now his severest critics, not for what he had done as for how he had done it. He had

put himself outside the pale of those easy indulgences which the world willingly accords so long as no violence is offered to its codes of convention.

He was proud, and his pride was hurt at the mere thought of how all his friends and acquaintances were speaking of him whenever they remembered him at all; and they would so remember because of the prominence of Aubrey's name. With little right or justice in his anger, he grew each day more deeply angered with his cousin. He persuaded himself that it must have been Aubrey's influence which had decided so young a woman as Gladys to lead so strange and wretched a life.

'I left her everything she could want or wish,' he thought in his self-justification. 'She was free to live in the world at her pleasure; I had taken care that no blame should rest on her, and I had given her the half of all I possessed; she might have been happy, quite happy, in her own way if she had chosen; it was not I who exiled her to a cottage by a lonely weather-beaten shore, and bade her exist on the pittance that came to her from her father.'

Why could she not have continued to enjoy all those material consolations and compensations with which he had so liberally surrounded her? If she had done that, his conscience would have been at rest, and the world would have seen in their separation nothing but a mutual and excusable agreement to lead their lives apart.

It must have been Aubrey, he reasoned, who had sustained her in her headstrong and extravagant resolution; it was just such a choice as would commend itself to him, austere, romantic, and unworldly.

After a few weeks of irresolution and of many agitated and conflicting impulses, he said abruptly and with much embarrassment to the Duchess Soria:

'It is absolutely necessary that I should go to England. Would you allow and not misconstrue it?'

She looked at him some moments before she replied:

'My dear, I am not your keeper. And I suppose you have honour.'

He felt himself colour under the profound gaze of her deep eyes. He kissed her hand with emotion.

'I thank you,' he said simply; he knew that he had once given her every cause to mistrust him for ever. Her confidence in him seemed very noble, and appealed to him as no expressions of doubt or of fear could have done.

'I am utterly unworthy of her!' he thought bitterly. How often his suspicions had wronged her in days that were gone by; how little fitted he had been to be the supreme passion of such a woman's life!

Several days passed by; she asked him neither why he lingered nor when he would go. That reserve in one to whom he had given every title to doubt his word in their past relations seemed to him very magnanimous.

He loved her, he thought, more than he had ever loved her, but all the strength of his admiration could not drive out from him the restless, haunting remembrance of what might be then being said and being done in England.

It was now well-nigh mid-winter; there, dreary, misty, cold, with drifting snows; here, gay, luminous, brilliant, with gorgeous sunsets and buoyant wind-tossed seas.

'I shall be away but a very little while,' he said to her with hesitation.

'Go as you will,' she answered him. He felt that these reins let fall thus upon his neck did in truth and honour hold him more closely than all chains.

'Ah! if only you had always been as kind and as generous,' he murmured, thinking of those other days when her impetuous demands and her violent exactions had chafed his soul into revolt.

She smiled with a little sadness.

'Alas, alas!' she thought, 'men should not quarrel as they do with our jealousies and importunities; when we cease to feel them life has taken the tenderest fibre out of our hearts. I am never jealous of him now; but sometimes I wish to heaven that it were only possible that I could be! It is those tempests of folly which give birth to the sweetest of our joys.'

She would have given half that she possessed could she only once more have felt all those intense and exquisite pains which are the procreation of the richest joys, could only his absence have tortured her, his presence intoxicated her, as it had once done.

Was it mere caprice or wantonness of fate that now, when he was so utterly her own in all ways, she had so little gladness in her empire?

Was it indifference, or pride, or really magnanimity which made her leave him unquestioned to go whither he would?

'Nay,' she thought, and rightly. 'He could not now be faithless to his promise if he would. The handless and footless god that smote Glaucus would smite him for me. He would be the lowest of the low.'

And she let him go, and asked him nothing.

'Alas!' she thought again. 'It is when men most curse us that they should bless us most. All that immense love which raises them into the deities of our lives only wearies them, satiates them, and makes them cold and fretful; and yet, if only they knew, how much better we are when we can still feel it!—**what poor, innocent, fond fools, though so burdensome to them!**

And when it is gone, it is gone for ever, and something which was best in us is gone too, and we live for our senses, or for our triumphs, or for our intelligences, but we live for a great love no more! But we have learned wisdom, and wit comes to us where adoration has died, and our lovers find us calmer, and they deem their loss their gain—fools, fools, both we and they!

## CHAPTER LIII.

HE went without halt across Europe to his own country; the weather was cold and dark, the seas were stormy, the winds piercingly cold; after the radiance and the softness of the land he had left, it seemed to him like entering some dreary Gehenna of tormented and icy air. He travelled straightway to Ladys-rood, and went thither unannounced. He had old and faithful servants who kept all others of the household in obedience and subjection; but the great house had a desolate air in its utter abandonment. There was little light, little warmth, all the furniture of the rooms was shrouded in its linen coverings, and only in the central hall was there a large fire burning. His step sounded hollow on floors from which their zealous thrift had removed the carpets, and the hastily-lit lamps struggled feebly against the general gloom.

‘I have always told you to keep the house as perfectly ready as though you expected me at any moment,’ he said with anger.

The people were afraid to reply that after so many months of absence his arrival had seemed to them the most unlikely of all possible chances.

The silence, the coldness, and the loneliness of his home chilled him to the bone. It seemed an emblem of that solitude to which Gladys was condemned in her youth. The night was very cold, and one of the wild winter storms of the south-west country raged without until morning. He slept very little, and rose from his bed unrefreshed. He regretted that he had come there. He sighed for the evergreen, orange, and magnolia groves, the purpling violets, the unfrozen fountains, the dancing sun-rays of the glad gardens of the Soria Palace. Here was the winter of the earth and the winter of the soul. He cursed the morbid restlessness, the uneasy discontent, which had drawn him from his paradise.

Now that he was here, what more could he know than he knew? He could not seek his wife; the woman whom he loved



had trusted him ; he had too much good faith and sentiment of honour left in him not to be true to an unwritten bond.

The storm had subsided with dawn, but the day was dull and heavy, the skies were obscured, and the air was charged with vapour. The sense of immense weariness and depression, which had in other years always come upon him in England in winter, returned upon him a thousandfold now. He passed the forenoon in his library in intercourse with his men of business and stewards, in the examination of those questions of leasehold and freehold, of forest rights and moor rights, of rents and investments, which had been the ostensible reason of his momentary return home. It was well for him that those who served him had truly his interest at heart, for he heeded very little the explanations which they gave him, and signed many papers without knowing very clearly why he did so. He was thinking, as he apparently attended to the prolix arguments of his visitants, of the day when, in that chamber, he had written the letter which had broken off his relations with Beatrice Soria. He was overwhelmed with the greatness of her pardon when he thought of that unutterable insult to the proudest of all living women. Then his memories wandered away from her to that other day when he had held the *Horæ* open for a young girl to read, and watched her first blush rise like sunrise over her fair face. It was only five years before, and in those five years what suffering he had caused to both these women ; and yet how well one at the least still loved him, if the other—what of the other?—even if she had been ever too passionless to care for him, yet how much she had lost through him !

The tedious grey day wore away slowly ; most of its hours occupied with prosaic details and dull discussions of ways and means, of law and equity, of forestry and finance, and all the various matters of importance which grow out of the management of great estates and of a great fortune. It was dusk when his people left him ; he remained in the library beside the hearth, where there was not even a dog to welcome him.

‘Where is Kenneth?’ he asked of a servant who came in at that moment to light the chandeliers. Kenneth was a colly which had been a chief favourite with both himself and Gladys.

The man hesitated with some embarrassment as to how he should reply.

‘Where are Kenneth and the other house-dogs?’ repeated his master impatiently. The servant answered timidly that her ladyship had sent for them to Christlea a year ago.

‘Ah, of course ; they were hers,’ Guilderoy replied quickly, regretful of his question.

She had been quite within her right to take the dogs, nor

did he grudge her their innocent companionship ; but the kind brown eyes of Kenneth and his comrades, if they had been there to look at him then, would have seemed to break the spell of this horrible loneliness, to ease the burden of these painful memories which weighed on him.

The evening was yet more gloomy than the day. He paced to and fro the suite of the Queen Anne apartments wearily and drearily. They were all restored to their fullest comfort, and had all that light and warmth and the fragrance of hothouse flowers could bring to them, but to him they were immeasurably, unconscionably melancholy.

All his past life came before him in those solitary hours. He recalled all his childish ideals, his boyish admirations of great men, his vague dreams as a youth of some greatness which he would achieve, some added lustre which he would bring to his name and race. Where had all these gone ? In what had all these ended ? In the lassitude and languor of satiety, in the nerveless indifference of a polished pessimist, in the evaporated fumes of innumerable pleasures quickly tasted and exhausted.

‘At least I *have* enjoyed,’ he thought. ‘Could Aubrey say as much ?’

But though his philosophy consoled, his conscience did not satisfy, him. It was not for mere self-indulgence that his fathers had alone lived ; it was not by mere self-abandonment that his country had been made what it once had been.

Great men had, indeed, in all ages been lovers of pleasure, but pleasure had been their pastime, not their sole pursuit. He walked to and fro the length of the now warm and illuminated rooms, and his surveys of his past brought him more dissatisfaction than contentment. To men he knew that he seemed but an idler ; to women, perhaps, he seemed a traitor.

The vision of his wife alone in that lonely little house, amongst the dense sea-fogs and the bare black orchards, haunted him with pain ; and the memory of the woman whom he loved as he had left her in the splendour of her beauty, and of the golden evening sunlight pouring through her painted chamber, haunted him with that irresistible and unresisted power which she always possessed over him. In the depression of his solitary musings he seemed in his own sight unworthy of either of them, and wholly undeserving of their constancy or their regret.

Before he slept he sent for the old housekeeper of Ladys-wood. She had been with his mother on her death-bed, and had nursed and played with him as a child. He could ask of her what he could not bring himself to ask of any of the men.

‘Tell me, Margaret,’ he said to her as soon as she stood before him in the warm red drawing-room where John Vernon

had bade his daughter live for honour if she could not live for happiness—‘tell me, do you ever see my wife?’

The old woman was silent for awhile; the tears started to her eyes.

‘Alas, my dear lord, that ever you should have to ask me that!’ she murmured.

‘Never mind why I ask you; answer me. Do you often see her or ever see her?’

‘I have seen her very rarely, my lord, and never to speak to; it was in the open air, and my lady shunned me.’

‘How does she look?’

‘She looks older, but she looks well, my lord. The air is very fine and strong at Christ’slea.’

Guilderoy felt a sense of mortification, for which he hated himself.

‘She looks well, do you say?’

‘Not ill, my lord, but much older.’

‘You must hear of her often from the servants or the villagers?’

‘There is little to hear, my lord.’

‘You mean that she leads such a retired, such a secluded life?’

‘That is so, my lord. It is the same life as her father led; it suited him, no doubt, but it cannot suit a childless woman of her years.’

Guilderoy sighed impatiently.

‘It was her own choice.’

The housekeeper was silent; she respected him too much to contradict him, and she respected truth too well to agree with him.

‘She has all the dogs, they say?’ he asked.

‘Yes, my lord; she was ever very fond of the tykes.’

‘And how does she spend her time?’

‘Reading, they say, my lord, when she is indoors; and always out when the weather holds, and oftentimes even when it is very bad.’

‘And who does she see?’

‘No one, I believe, my lord.’

‘Not my sister?’

‘Her ladyship has never been nigh her.’

He hesitated a moment, then said:

‘But she receives visits from my cousin Aubrey, I am sure?’

‘Well, my lord, he is the only one of the family who has stood by her.’

‘I am grateful to him.’

Nevertheless his face flushed with an emotion which was not one of pleasure.

‘Is he often there?’

'Often, my lord, one may say, for one who is ever toiling for the country as he is, and has so little time left to himself.'

'It is very good of him. You may go, Margaret. Good-night.'

The old woman curtsied, and withdrew; but as she drew near the door she took courage and came a few steps back towards him. 'My dear lord, if I may make so bold, my lady is very young to be left in that lonely life. Maybe she chose it, but some say she was drove to it. She may have her faults, but she has more virtues, and—and—she lost her two children, my lord. Will you not go and see her now you are here, if only for sake of that one memory, my lord?'

Guilderoy's eyes grew dim.

'No, no, I cannot do that,' he said hastily and sternly. 'But you are a good woman to urge it, Margaret. You do not offend me. Good-night.'

'Good-night to you, my lord.'

The door closed on her, and he was alone with his own thoughts, which were painful companions.

He had an intense wish to see Gladys, a wish stronger than his anger against her. But all that remained to him of loyalty to a woman who had trusted him to be faithful to her forbade him such double duplicity. The words 'Go, you have honour,' were ever in his remembrance. Any interview with his wife, any effort even to seek one, any single word which could even distantly foreshadow the faintest reconciliation with her, were forbidden to him; he had plainly and for ever renounced any possibility of such when he had accepted the conditions on which the woman he loved had again become his.

To have accepted them only to break them, to have had the fulness of her faith only to cheat and evade it as a man can ever do if he wills, would have seemed to him something so foul that he would not have borne his life under the sense of degradation which such an act of betrayal would have left on him. His honour might rooted in dishonour stand, but it was at least loyal to the one who had trusted to it. Yet a great desire was upon him to see his wife; the remembrance of her was upon him as he had known her in the early days of Christ'slea, and that remembrance softened his heart towards her and outweighed the heavy and bitter memories of their last interview in Naples. The night passed with him again sleeplessly and painfully.

The winds were high and swept round the stately and solid house with gusts of fury; the stillness between them was filled with the sound of rushing rains. The day broke, with no rain falling, but with low and heavy clouds. At noon he rode out in its gloom, and through his woods towards the moors; rode fast

against the watery cold air, over the soaked turf, and thinking ever as he went of the time he had ridden thus to seek John Vernon, on a mere idle caprice which waywardness and imagination had raised into a fancied passion for one fleeting hour. The sky was low, the sea was still, the earth was silent as he went; the dull atmosphere and the melancholy solitude oppressed him as with some sensation of physical ill. Through the mist which hung everywhere over the water and the land the few distant sails on the sea, the few forms passing on the moors of men or cattle, looked unsubstantial and unreal. To him, whose life was always passed in movement or in pleasure, in the gratification either of the senses or of the intelligence, the winter stillness and loneliness of the country and the shore had a feeling of death in them.

His horse, tired with the wet and heavy ground, went slowly, and he did not urge it to more speed; he rode on, lost in his own thoughts, taking, almost without knowing it, the road to the cottage of Christlea. He had the fullest resolve not to see his wife, nor to allow himself to be seen by her; yet with an unconscious and irresistible impulsion he took his way towards the place where she dwelt, until from the level turf of the cliffs above the house he looked down on its thatched roof, its peaked gables, its thick environment of tangled branches. There was not a sound coming from it; a little smoke hung on the vaporous air; a few pigeons flew low under its eaves; a holly-tree stood glowing with scarlet berries tall and straight against the sky. To him, come from the vast palaces and marble terraces and sun-bathed gardens of the south, it looked like almost a hovel, with its humble lowliness and modest colouring so like the brown earth and the grey boughs which surrounded it. It hurt his pride to think that his wife should live there in penury and obscurity. She bore his name, she was the mistress of his houses, she had a right to his riches and his possessions of all kinds, and she dwelt here in less comfort and less stateliness than the wife of his steward enjoyed!

And all his world knew it, and any one of his friends who chose could come and see the poorness and lowliness of her lot!

He dismounted and walked to the edge of the cliff and let his horse stray as it would, blown and heated, cropping the short wet turf to its own hurt.

A vague desire to enter the house and ask for her and see her face to face was in him. But he would have been perjured and degraded had he yielded to it. Far away in the golden light of the Neapolitan day was a woman who had said to him—'You have honour.'

He remembered her, and to her at least was faithful.

On the tableland of the cliff near at hand was the little barn-

like, rustic church of this small sea-parish, and around it were those obscure graves of which John Vernon's was one, conspicuous amongst the low-lying headstones by the fair column of white marble she and he had raised there to his memory with one line graven on it in the language he best loved :

*Mori est felicitas, antequam mortem invocet.*

He looked at the white pillar looming faintly through the sea-fog, and had he been a woman he could have wept.

'I was false to him, I was false to him!' he thought; and his heart ached with the futile pang of a regret which cannot reach or atone to the dead.

He had too often pardoned to himself his own transgressions, too often too carelessly excused to himself errors and follies which he thought lightly of because they were welcome and easy; but the sense of his own disloyalty he could not palliate or smooth away with sophistry; he deemed it a dishonour and he hated it.

For the first time in all his years he was guilty in his own sight. He had promised what he had not fulfilled; he had been untrue to a man who could no more call his actions to account. As he stood looking down on the russet roof and the tangled wood in the shadowy misty winter's morning, he saw the figure of a woman leave the porch and pass under the branches outwards towards the shore. He could not see her face from his position so far above her, but he could see by her figure, by her bearing, by her step, that the housekeeper had said truly—she was in perfect health and strength.

She walked quickly and firmly; the dogs leaping on her and running on before her. She wore the long black cloak of sables in which he had seen her last in Naples. For some minutes he lost her from view under the trees; then she appeared again upon the strip of sandy shore, where the waves were rolling up with low angry murmur as though exhausted by the fury of the past night. Then she turned from the sea, and mounted the cliff path leading to the churchyard. He perceived that she had a basket of evergreens and snowdrops in her hand; she was coming no doubt on her daily errand of visiting her father's grave. The mist was lighter now, and, though some way off her, he saw her plainly as she mounted the steep path cut in the granite of the cliff, so familiar to her from her childhood.

'What a life! what a life!' he thought, 'what a wretched life if she have no consolations!'

A violent impulse moved him to demand from her if there were any, if the gossip of the world was true which traced to Aubrey's influence her choice of this seclusion; he wished to tell

her that he would be the last to blame her if it were so, and that here, within sight of her father's grave, he would ask her pardon and give her his; so at least there might be peace between them.

And yet, as he watched her from the distance crossing the grass of the cliffs with that elastic step which he had so often admired, and which all women had envied her, a more sombre and more ignoble feeling moved him, a restless jealousy of past possession, a sense that the dignity of his name was in her hands and that she could play with it as she chose, and that he had lost the right to blame her, whatever she might select to do with it.

He watched her pass across the tableland towards the graveyard; she did not look towards him; she went straight on to the wicket of the burial-place, opened it, and passed within; the growth of rose-thorn and privet and holly within its low walls of rubble hid her entirely from him.

He hesitated a moment; a great, almost ungovernable, wish arose in him to go there and to say to her by her father's grave all the truths which had been so imperfectly uttered in the haste and bitterness of their last interview.

But a thousand miles away a woman trusted him!

To approach his wife, were it even only to say to her an eternal farewell, would be to be a traitor to his pledged word.

He had often been the slave of his passions, the fool of his fancy, but he had always been the servant of his honour.

One ill is not mended by another, he knew; one defalcation is not filled up by another; because he had been untrue to the dead man lying there was no reason or excuse that he should be untrue to the living woman who loved him.

He had voluntarily renounced his right to seek or to give explanations from and to his wife. It was one of those privileges of intimacy which he had of his own accord consented to abjure for ever.

He looked once more at the dusky foliage of the churchyard with the slender white column rising into the grey air; and with a sigh he drew his horse's bridle towards him, and led the beast down the precipitous and broken path which turned away from Christalea.

## CHAPTER LIV.

WITH evening he had left his own house, having learned nothing more than he had known before, but carrying with him in his soul the thorns of a restless inquietude and of an impotent regret.

He reached London in the morning and went straight to Balfrons House. Parliament had met and Aubrey was in town. There was a heavy rain falling, and the air was full of ice and sleet. The streets at that early hour were deserted. The city seemed a vast, colourless, smoking city of the dead.

Aubrey had risen with the day after an hour or two's rest after a prolonged debate. He was in his study, walking up and down the room and dictating to his secretaries before he broke his fast. The yellow and sickly air poured through the chamber dark with bookshelves and bronzes and tables laden and littered with documents of all kinds.

When he saw his cousin enter he paused in the dictation of his letters, and stood still, without any word or gesture of greeting.

'Can I see you alone for a moment?' asked Guilderoy as he entered.

Aubrey motioned to the young men to leave them; they passed into the large library beyond and closed the door.

Aubrey still spoke no word. He stood erect, the habitual stoop in his great height changed to a stateliness that was almost stiffness. He never held out his hand or said any syllable of greeting or of inquiry, his features were cold and stern.

Guilderoy heeded neither his attitude nor his expression.

Twelve months and more had passed by since they had met at Venice and had parted with unuttered but mutual hostility and offence. The knowledge which he had of Aubrey's certain scorn and condemnation of him gave to him an hauteur and an imperious impatience which seemed to his cousin mere arrogance, unbecoming, insolent, and out of place.

Guilderoy was very pale, and his eyes looked sleepless, but he had the manner and the courage of a man who arraigns another for wrong done to him, and is very far from all confession of error in himself.

'I am about to put to you a question which no man answers,' he said rapidly and without preface of explanation of his appearance there. 'At least no man answers in the affirmative. But whether affirmative or denial be in your case the truth, I expect the truth from you, having regard to the blood relationship between us and the position in which we have always stood to one another.'

Aubrey looked him full in the eyes.

'What is your question?' he asked in his coldest voice; a passing expression of ineffable disdain came over his features as he spoke.

'It is a very simple one,' said Guilderoy. 'Are you, as the world says, my wife's lover?'

Aubrey's eyes met his fully.



'I certainly need not answer,' he replied with a grave rebuke and scorn in his voice and in his gaze. 'You have lost all title to put such a question.'

'I have not lost the right, since she bears my name.'

'You have lost it morally, not legally. You could not be so ungenerous as to refuse a liberty which you take.'

Guilderoy's face flushed hotly.

'If you prevaricate I shall consider prevarication admission.'

Aubrey smiled slightly; a very cold, contemptuous smile.

'It is not my habit to prevaricate. I will answer your question, though I shall refuse to admit your title to put it to me. I am not your wife's lover, and if you had the slightest knowledge of my character you would not come to me on such an errand.'

Guilderoy was silent. He did not doubt the truth of the speaker; the whole country would have taken Aubrey's word unwitnessed against that of all other men; but he was dissatisfied.

'If you deny that you are her lover,' he said after long silence, 'you cannot deny that you have for her a feeling which is far beyond friendship, that you visit her in her solitude, that your assiduous attentions to her are matter of notoriety.'

'Am I bound to account to you for feelings unuttered to any human ear? Am I bound to respect for you ties which you have yourself strained to rupture? By what title do you come here? You have forsaken your wife utterly. You have told me that she was wearisome, unsympathetic, indifferent to you. What is it to you what I feel for her, or what I do not feel? I deny your right to attempt to penetrate my feelings, or to arraign my acts.'

He spoke with a force which was almost violence, and with a scorn which penetrated the very innermost fibres of his hearer's nerves.

'In every syllable of your answer you confess what you feel!' he said with equal violence. 'I may have no title to command my wife's affections; I never possessed them; but she is the holder of my name, and my name is dear to me, and no man shall play with it without being compelled to atone to me.'

Aubrey looked at him with unspeakable disdain. 'What would you do? What could you do? A man who has abandoned his wife cannot challenge either her enemies or her lovers; he is nothing in her life. If I were to her what you suppose, what could you say to me in common decency or justice? I should but have filled up the place you left vacant. I should but have soothed the wounds which you caused. You would have no shadow of title to arraign me for it. Even the world itself would prefer my errors to yours, would admit that you had but the payment you merited.'

'I care neither what the world would say nor what you would think,' said Guilderoy, now white with passion. 'I care for the honour of my name, and I should not pause either for your relationship to me or for the admirable lucidity of your reasonings if I believed that you had done me any wrong which would make me absurd and degraded before other men.'

Aubrey smiled; the same slight, contemptuous, fleeting smile, which stung Guilderoy like the stroke of a whip, stung him in his pride, his sensitiveness, and his conscience all at once.

'You would make a scandal?' said Aubrey coldly. 'You would do unwisely. Men whose names are before the world should keep them clean and hold them high. We might agree to kill each other *en cachette*, but if we called the public in to witness our quarrel we should be worse than fools. We are not playing a melodrama of elective affinities: we are living out our lives before a world which hates us, and is every hour of its day gaping at us to find a chink in our harness or a stain on our shields. You must gratify it if you will. I shall not aid you. I am not the lover of your wife. I have never spoken any word to her that you would not have been free to hear. I have stood by her, certainly, under the unmerited neglect and obloquy which have fallen on her through you. I should so stand by any innocent woman whose friend I once had been. And so much I admit to you not for my own sake or yours, nor yet because I in any way admit your rights or am moved by your menaces, but because such a declaration is due to her—since it is the truth, so help me God.'

There was a tone in the last solemn words which stilled the fury and awed the soul of his hearer. Guilderoy doubted no more.

'I believe you,' he said briefly. 'The whole nation would believe your bare word. I wish to heaven,' he added with emotion, 'that she had been yours, not mine; we should all have been far happier than we are.'

'Such regrets are useless,' said Aubrey. 'The greatest burden of man's life has been created by man, and it is called the holy state of marriage. But—this I must say to you too—if you imagine that she cares for me you are in great error. She cares for you alone. You may bruise her heart as you choose; your name is still the only one written in it.'

'Do not tell me so,' said Guilderoy hastily and with pain. 'It can make no difference now.'

'I have told you so because it is so.'

'That may be. It can make no difference in me.'

Aubrey was silent.

'You intend always to live as you are living now?'

‘I must in honour.’

‘And you leave her virtually widowed at twenty-two years of age, and you exact her fidelity!’

‘I exact nothing, And I beg to apologise to you for the time which I have wasted for you in a demand which, as I have expressed my belief, was founded on unjust suspicions.’

He lingered a moment, waiting for some expression in return from Aubrey, some farewell, some acknowledgment of his last words. But Aubrey remained standing where he was and said nothing. He did not offer his hand; his features were very cold, his expression almost harsh. He allowed his cousin to leave him without any word or gesture of valediction.

Guilderoy bowed to him in silence and quitted the room.

‘If I did not belong to my family and my country, I should kill him before he reaches the street,’ thought Aubrey when the door closed, as the fire ran through his veins of that old barbaric passion which sleeps in the blood of all men of high courage and strong feeling.

## CHAPTER LV.

In the following week, he stood on the cliff above Christsea, having responded to a wistful message asking for his return there.

‘Why have you sent for me?’ he asked her.

‘Why do you never come to me unless I send?’

He looked away from her.

‘Why,’ she persisted, ‘you used to come and see me so very often.’

Aubrey hesitated.

‘The world is suspicious, my dear,’ he said at last; ‘and you are a very young, and, though you always seem to forget it, a beautiful woman. I do not wish them to say evil things of you.’

She coloured violently.

‘They would never say of us——’

‘I fear they do, dear.’

She was silent; her face was very flushed and pained.

‘How evil the world is!’ she murmured. ‘But let them say what they will. It does not matter. We know——’

‘It matters for you.’

He moved uneasily; his position towards her became every day of his life more embarrassing to him, more strained, more

difficult. The very frankness and perfectness of her confidence in him was an added embarrassment the more.

It seemed brutal to rob her of her only solace, to suggest misconstruction to so much innocence and courage, to place between himself and her the constraint which such a warning must of necessity create.

She sat on the edge of the cliff, unconsciously plucking the little flowerets of the wild thyme which grew so thickly there. He stood beside her and looked down on her.

'Gladys,' he said abruptly, 'my cousin came to me a few days ago.'

Her face lost its warmth and grew very cold.

'I heard that he had been a night at Ladysrood,' she answered.

'Yes. He did not approach you?'

'Can you think that he would dare?'

'You forget, he has still the right.'

'He has no moral right; no right on earth that I acknowledge.'

'You are too harsh, my dear. His rights always exist; and, whether you will hear it or not, I must say to you that I believe his feelings for you are not wholly dead, as you think.'

She cast the gathered thyme upon the grass, and rose to her feet.

'I care nothing what they are or are not. His life is dead to mine.'

'Is that how your father would have had you speak?'

'My father was a good and wise man, but he knew nothing of a woman's heart.'

'Perhaps he knew so much that he believed its forgiveness inexhaustible and its patience divine—as they should be.'

She was silent. She stood looking out to the grey wind-blown sea. Her eyes were cold and had no relenting in them, her face had grown pale.

'Some women may be made like that,' she said at last. 'I am not. He has made his life without me. I have made mine without him. That is all. Why talk of it?'

'How have you made your life? Child that you are, do you mean that you can live all your lonely years like this—always like this, until old age comes to you?'

'Women live so in convents. Why not I?'

'Women in convents live unnatural lives, as from mistaken motives you are doing. Every life without the natural indulgence of its sentiments and affections is restricted, barren, and unblest.'

She was again silent; her eyes watching afar off a fishing-boat tossing in the deep trough of the waves.

'Why do you say these things to me?' she asked at last. 'Surely, when one is left alone, there are more dignity and decency in passive acquiescence in one's fate than in any noisy revolt against it?'

'Yes; but if he returned to you? Would your pride stand in the way of reconciliation?'

'Has he told you to ask me that?'

'No; he said nothing which could even suggest it. But it was clear to me that he regretted his own actions, and regret is always near repentance.'

'He will never feel repentance, nor even any very real regret. He may feel inconvenience, irritation, anxiety for the world's opinion—caprice, fatigue, satiety—nothing more.'

'I begin to think that you have never loved him, Gladys.'

'Perhaps not.'

He looked at her, troubled and perplexed by her tone; seeing no way into her real meaning, wondering at her strength in keeping the secret of her own feelings so closely in such long solitude.

'There is no love,' he said almost harshly, 'where there is any consideration of self. There may be desire, pride, pique, egotism; but there is no love. I have told you so many times. I should wish your own heart to tell it you without me.'

'Are all feeling, all sacrifice, all pain, then, to be on one side alone?'

'A great love never asks that question, my dear. It gives all it has to give, unweighed.'

Something in his voice as he spoke, something in his expression as he looked down on her, went to her heart with a sudden sense of what his feeling was for her. She had never thought of it before; she had taken all his faithful and tender friendship as created rather by his position towards Guilderoy than by any personal devotion to herself. She had been engrossed in that absorbing selfishness which great suffering creates, and she had passed over unnoticed a thousand things which might have told her what he felt had not her whole thoughts and her whole emotions been given to the tragedy of her own fate. Now some vague perception of the truth came to her, although he had so loyally concealed it. Some sudden sense of all which he had done for her, all which he wasted on her, all which he restrained and denied for her sake, came upon her with a mute, ineffable reproach. How selfish she had been, and how ungenerous, before this immense and unuttered devotion! She dropped her head upon her hands and burst into a passion of tears.

'Forgive me, forgive me!' she murmured, weeping, not knowing what she said.

'I have nothing to forgive, dear,' he said, surprised and

touched to the quick. 'I want you to forgive, because I know that, unless you do so, no peace will ever come to you.'

He waited a moment, but she made no reply.

'I must go now,' he said, 'or I shall not be able to be in London to-night. Will you think of what I have said? The day will come when you will have occasion to think of it. And, my dear, do not deem me unkind if I cease my visits to you. They are ill-judged by the world, and they displease my cousin. Of course, if you ever need me greatly I will come; but not habitually, familiarly, as I have come of late.'

Her face changed, and her brows contracted almost sullenly.

'You will sacrifice me to him!'

'No. But I will not sacrifice you to the evil construction of either your husband or the world.'

'I thought you had more courage!'

Aubrey smiled sadly.

'It is not courage which is wanting to me, my child. Perhaps some day you will understand my motives, if you do not now. Meantime, do not misjudge me nor doubt my sincere regard for all your truest interests.'

The words seemed very cold to her and conventional.

She was very young still, and she longed for tenderness, for indulgence, for an affection which should let her lean her aching life upon it and there find rest.

When he went from her in the dusky, windy, cloudy day the sense of an immense loss came over her; the solitude of her life closed in on her; and she saw night descend with terror of its sleepless hours.

## CHAPTER LVI.

ON that same day Guilderoy saw once more the smiling sunshine, the green gardens and orange woods, the stately marble walls of the Soria Palace. It was late in the afternoon when he reached Naples. A glorious sunset was burning in the west. Innumerable sails covered the sea. The zenith was a deep translucent blue, the air clear and buoyant, with gaiety and healing in its breezes. The streets were mirthful with the sports of early Carnival, and the shouts and songs and clang of brazen music came softened to the ear as he sat once more in the little cabinet of the Albani and looked towards the bay through the marble arches of the loggia beyond.

Whether from pride, magnanimity, or forbearance (he knew not which) Beatrice Soria had asked him no questions.

'You have soon returned,' she said to him simply, when he first came to her; and she had made no after allusion to his absence or its causes. She knew well that if he had broken his word to her he would not have so returned, nay, would never have dared to meet her eyes again.

He longed to tell her all that he had felt; the sweetest charm of love is the power and privilege of laying bare the soul in all its inconsistencies and follies; but this pleasure was refused to him by his own action in the past. Where he had been once faithless to her before, delicacy made it impossible for him to say one word which should seem to hint at any regret or any change for or in his present faith to her. That first disloyalty was always there as a spectre between them. It would be impossible to show her all the conflicting emotions which had swayed him by turns during his brief visit to England. He would have been glad to do so; he felt something of the pathetic human instinct to confide in some one beloved the doubts and the self-reproaches which tormented him, and so in a manner be free of their burden of perplexity. But this he dared not do. Under the circumstances of their late reunion, any such confidence must inevitably have appeared to be either a hint of desired freedom or a confession of futile regret; either would be an insult to her. He felt that even any shadow which came over his face, any momentary mood of abstracted thought or of visible depression, must seem a tacit admission that he regretted the price which he had paid for the past year of happiness beside her. He knew that he had once seemed to her the forsworn, cowardly, and treacherous slave of his own caprices; he dared risk nothing which could by any kind of possibility place him in such a light to her again. What could such a woman as she was think of him if she ever felt that, even in the full blessing and glory of her love, he could fret at and begrudge the cost which it had been to him? He respected the stronger courage of her nature, he even respected her for the scorn which now and then flashed out from her upon himself, and he felt both reverence and gratitude for the faithful and fervent passion which she had spent, and in so much wasted, upon his life. Nothing can be more untrue than that in such relations as theirs reverence is impossible; reverence is excited by character, not by situation, and he had learned to appreciate her nature as he had never done in earlier days. The very completeness and sincerity of the proof which she had demanded from him had showed a force in her before which he felt himself wavering, weak, almost worthless, of a single thought of hers.

He did his uttermost to conceal the depression which weighed

upon him; the distress with which he was haunted when he thought of that little house in the gloom and silence of the lone sea-shore; the anger and impatient shame with which the recollections of Aubrey's words of scorn moved him whenever they recurred to him.

He knew, he felt, that one living man despised him; and that man the one whom of all others he most esteemed himself, and most admired. He had always been irritably conscious of the greatness of Aubrey's life as contrasted with the frivolity and self-indulgence of his own. It was an unendurable humiliation to him to be conscious that he had made it possible for his cousin to address to him those scathing words which pursued him in memory as though they were the very voices of pursuing ghosts.

And although he had received and had accepted his cousin's statement of his relations to his wife, and did honestly in his soul believe them, yet it made him restless and unhappy to know that their intimacy, however harmless, was familiar and unwitnessed, that even, though only her friend, Aubrey was still her only friend and her most loyal servant. It offended, it wounded, it tormented him; and all his efforts could not conceal from the penetration of Beatrice Soria that the lassitude and dissatisfaction which she had observed in him when in her villa on the Brenta in the past autumn had increased greatly since his brief absence, and were rendered even the more visible by the endeavours which he made to hide them under the over-affectation of carelessness or the over-protestation of devotion. She had the intuition and the penetration which are alone possible to a woman who is too learned in love to be the servant of it, and too sure of her power ever to be vain with petty vanities; she saw in him the reflection of that vague disappointment which had haunted her in her meditations amongst the autumn beauty of her gardens in the Veneto; she realised that he too, like herself, though later than she, had failed to find the same wonder-flower which they had found and gathered together in other years. She was generous; she was proud to arrogance, and she knew human character with a knowledge that made her at once disdainful and impatient of it. She had had her own way; she had ruled him as she chose; she had exacted and enjoyed her just vengeance to the uttermost iota; what more could the future bring her? And besides this likewise there was in her the generous scorn of a patrician temper to hold by obligation what has fled already in will, to enforce a bond from which the soul had already gone. There was much arrogance in her, and there had been some cruelty, but there was more magnanimity than there was either.

She said nothing to him, but she watched him in the weeks



which followed on his return ; and she read his mind as though it had been opened before her like a book. She felt with a pang that what she read there mattered but little to her ; a year before his emotions had been her world, now it seemed of small account that they should wander from her. What joy would there be in slowly-dying illusion, in slowly-fading rapture, in slowly-chilling passion ? What triumph would there be in watching the sure, if gradual, change of ecstasy into monotony, of gratitude into tedium, of fervour into habit ? She knew the truth of the Greek counsel, 'Break off the laurel-bough whilst it is yet green, and burn it. Wait not until it withers.' She was an Epicurean, and carried into the passions of her life at once the fires of the senses and the coldness of philosophy. When she had loved him first she had been all fire ; now her wisdom was greater than her love, now she could bear to put her heart under the spectrum and watch its pulses change from fast to slow.

The months of Carnival follies passed, and the spring equinox blew open the spathes of the narcissi and called up the golden sceptres of the asphodel in all the southern pastures. One night they strolled together along the white terrace which overhung the sea, as they had done a thousand times in the year just passed and in the other years of a still more gracious time. The full moon was shining, the murmur of the waves was audible, the air was heavy with the scent of lemon flowers from the gardens beyond. It was Italy, luminous, fragrant, amorous ; yet amidst it all he sighed. The sigh was unconscious, but it was eloquent. She paused and looked at him. A slight smile came on her mouth, half of pity, half of scorn.

'If you are not happy,' she said slowly, 'remember—I am not your gaoler. Say so, and go.'

He started violently, ashamed and bewildered, and ignorant of what he had betrayed.

'What do you mean ?' he asked. 'Happy ! You have given me a happiness of which one needs to be god, not man, to be worthy !'

'Yes, you have been happy,' she said thoughtfully. 'It is something. Well, go whilst you still are grateful for it.'

'Go ? go where ?'

'Go to your wife.'

Even by the moonlight she saw how white his face grew as he heard her ; he was paralysed with fear and wonder.

'Why do you insult me ?' he muttered ; 'you have my word.'

'Yes ; I have had your word,' she said with disdain, but with no anger. 'What is a corpse worth when its soul has fled ?'

‘You cannot think——’

‘I think you are like all men. Once I thought that you were unlike them. But that is long ago.’

He winced under the words as though she had struck him.

‘Is it dead in you?’ he cried with the passion of despair. ‘Can no love live?’

‘I know not,’ she said wearily. ‘Perhaps not; who can tell?’

‘I can tell. I love you for ever.’

‘In a sense you do, yes.’

She sat down on one of the marble chairs of the terrace; the seat was shaped like a throne, and was covered with a lion’s skin. She looked like some great queen come to pass judgment, the silvery tissues and silvery fur of her dress gleamed in the moonbeams, the diamonds which were round her throat shone, her eyes were full of light and heavy with tears.

‘My dear, do not let us part in any anger,’ she said calmly. ‘Anger is so base in those who have been lovers. Once I was angry often, and to fury even. I would that that time were here still in all its madness, in all its abasement. But it is dead. You have been happier than I in our reunion. I was haunted by the past, which you forgot. I wanted what I could not have—my youth. You had belonged to my youth, and my mind had outgrown you, though I knew it not. Nay, I mean nothing unkind. We change in body and mind. No passion, once broken, will ever bear renewal.’

She sighed heavily; he was silent; he was deeply and cruelly humiliated, and yet he knew that she had spoken the truth of herself, if not of him.

‘Go to your wife,’ she repeated. ‘I am sure that you have seen her, though I am equally sure that you have not spoken with her, for you would never have dared to return to me if you had. You do not care for her; you will never care for her. But she embodies to you peace of mind, social repute, and personal dignity. You attach weight to the opinion of the world. You are wretched if men speak ill of you. With that character neither man nor woman should ever brave the world. They should leave that temerity to those who have both a great passion and a great courage. They alone can do it and never repent. You repent—now—every hour of your life.’

‘You are cruelly unjust! Never once have I said or thought or felt anything but the very deepest gratitude to you.’

‘In a sense, no. I am not denying that you love me still. I say that, having the temperament you possess, you cannot be content without the world’s esteem. It wearies you to earn it, but without it you are uneasy and ashamed.’

‘You would make me out the very poorest of fools!’

‘No ; your feeling is not ignoble, for it comes rather from faithfulness to your race and your traditions than from any minor timidity or selfishness. But, let it spring from what it may, it is in you. You are not a man who can long forget self. You are incapable of a life-long devotion.’

‘If I live you will see how mercilessly unjust you are.’

‘No ; you would promise what you could not fulfil. Every year, every day our relations would grow more familiar to you, and so less powerful to hold or satisfy you. Every year, every day you would remember with more bitterness all that you have given up in sacrificing your good name and your position in your own country. Your country is intolerable to you ; you hate its weather, its society, its politics, its hypocrisies, and its climate ; but yet, having given it up, you sigh for it. As it is with your country, so is it with your wife. You do not care for her—you will never care for her. But she represents something which you have lost by your own act, and so you fret for her.’

Where he stood beside her in the moonlight his face flushed painfully.

‘It is not that. It is not what you think,’ he said with agitation. ‘You know well I have no feeling for her of that sort. But I know that she lives in suffering, possibly even in temptation, and I cannot forget that when I married her I swore to her father that I would make her happiness as far as a man can make a woman’s. Of course those promises are made and forgotten in all marriages, people cannot keep them even if they would ; but he was a man whom I honoured, and he is dead, and it seems vile to have been false to him. That is all the regret that I feel, that I have felt. I do not think it is a feeling which, if you could wholly understand it, you would despise.’

‘I do not despise it. But I do not see why it comes to you so late.’

He was silent.

He knew well enough that yonder on the sea the night that he had been bidden by her to make and abide by his choice, he had resolved to choose the sacrifice of his happiness rather than of his word, but that the anger which his wife’s unbidden presence had aroused in him, and the impetuosity of his emotions, had hurried him into the choice which had appeared to his companion to be wholly voluntary and dispassionately meditated. But he could not say this to her ; and, after all, he knew that his conscience had not spoken to him until in the streets of Venice he had heard the jest about his cousin’s visit to Christlesea.

‘But I adore you, I adore you ! I could not bear my life

without you!' he cried as he kissed the silvery furs of her mantle.

'Oh, yes, you will bear it,' she said with a smile which was half sad, half scornful. 'You love me as much as you can love, but it is not very profoundly. And I am quite sure that you will love many after me. The only woman you will never love is your wife. Of that I am satisfied. But you will go back to her. You will place yourself right in the world's eyes. I dare say you will have many children, like the virtuous prince in the fairy-tales, and you will never see me in the world without a sigh. It will be your contribution to the past, and you will imagine that you are wretched because you have lost me; it will even serve you, perhaps, as a *pose* to interest other women!'

He rose to his feet, stung and wounded beyond words.

There was germ enough of truth in the cruel words to hurt him more profoundly than any accusation wholly unjust, and yet there was injustice enough in them to rouse an agony of indignation in his heart.

'Have I deserved this from you?' he said with hot tears standing in his eyes. 'Have I ever given you right or cause to say such things of me? Once, indeed, I sinned against you, I offended you. I have done my best to atone for that. Which of us is it now who first speaks of severance and of disillusion? Which of us is it now who finds our relations insufficient and monotonous? You are unjust to me—cruelly, barbarously unjust. I have told you the truth of my own feelings as I analyse and find them. If my candour wrongs me in your sight I cannot help it. If a man and a woman, after years of intimacy, cannot speak the truth to one another, who can? The remorse that I feel for my own failure to pledges which I voluntarily took has nothing to do with my devotion to you. I am neither a great man nor a good one, but such as I am I have given you all my life. I ask nothing of you or of fate but to be allowed to so give it ever.'

The tears which had dimmed his eyes rolled down his cheeks. He felt passionately and profoundly; and he felt also his own utter impotence to persuade her that he did so.

She looked at him with the tender but tranquil gaze of a woman who has loved but loves no more.

'Whilst I could and did believe that I loved you greatly, I had the right to take your life to mine. Now that I do not believe that, now that I look in my own heart and feel that in much it has ceased to respond to yours, I have no longer such a right. I am bound to restore you to your world, to your freedom, to your friends.'

'And you think that my life is to be thrown aside like that, as if it were a mere toy of which you had tired!'

‘I have never treated it as a toy, nor ever treated it lightly, though once you treated mine so. You are unhappy, and you will be unhappy—for a time. But you will be reconciled to yourself, to your society, and to your wife. Our position is one in which there can be the most perfect happiness, whatever moralists may say, so long as there is perfect love. But so long only; and that is not between us now, though there are the memories of it. They must be sacred enough to preserve us from all recrimination, from all enmity.’

The silence which followed on her words was filled only by the voice of the sea.

The splendour of the night was around them, and in its stillness there arose the song of an early-singing nightingale, breaking its heart in the orange grove. He gave a gesture of despair and cast himself once more at her feet.

‘I cannot live without you! I cannot—I cannot!’

She stooped and kissed him fondly, and with lingering touch upon his brow and hair.

‘Yes, you can; and you will. Do not wait to feel our affection decay and dwindle by inches day by day. Let us part while we still care enough to part in tenderness. So, dear—good-night!’

## CHAPTER LVII.

A FEW nights later Aubrey walked home from Westminster after a tedious debate; a weary waste of breath and speech serving no purpose but to bewilder brains already dull enough, and deafen a country already only too obtuse. He was fatigued, and was glad to breathe even the close air of London streets after those many hours of suffocating and useless verbiage.

His thoughts went, as they did ever in his lonely moments, to Gladys. Was she sleeping and dreaming, forgetful of her sorrows? Or was she sleepless and dreamless in that little chamber under the apple-boughs, within the sound of the sea? When he entered the great gates of Balfrons House it was almost daybreak; he went to his writing-room as usual to glance at any letters or despatches which might have come during the evening. There were several; but prominent to his eyes amongst them was a large envelope bearing the postmark of Paris and addressed to him by Guilderoy.

‘The only woman whom I love has dismissed me,’ said this strange message. ‘I am free with such poor freedom as can

be enjoyed by one who will for ever drag behind him the weight of an unchangeable regret. I shall never love the innocent woman whom I have married ; but I will, if she accepts such reparation, do my duty by her. I cannot, I dare not promise more. I have been false, often involuntarily, to all my past promises save one hitherto ; but to this promise which I now offer I will be faithful if her indulgence is extended to me and her affections can be satisfied with respect. I send my letter to her through you, first because I know that you have more influence over her than anyone ; and, in the second place, because I owe you amends for the insult and the suspicion which I passed upon you. I can give you no better proof of my conviction that both were undeserved by you than by sending through you this offer of my future to her. I trust to your loyalty and your honour in confiding such a mission to them, and can think of no better way to prove to you that I am confident you are her best friend and my most faithful adviser. You used harsh and bitter words to me when we last met ; but they were such as I esteem you for, and if severe they were deserved. I have had too much vanity and too much success in life and in love ; I have, in both, now received the most humiliating and the most indelible rebuff. I have failed to retain the heart and to satisfy the imagination of the one woman for whom I have felt a lasting or an unselfish passion. For my suffering you will care nothing, and you will say that in bringing a crippled and mortified heart to my wife I shall but offend her further. It may be so, and if she thinks so I shall not protest against her decision. But, again, you have said that she loves me still, and women who love content themselves with little. The immensity of their tenderness is wide enough to cover all shortcomings, and they are happy if they can heal any wounds, even if those wounds have been made by other women. I do not know that she has this tenderness to me ; she has always to me seemed very cold. But you have said that she has it, and has it for me. Be this as it may, she is proud ; she may prefer to silence the tongues of the world by a reunion which shall be as real, or merely as apparent, as she pleases. There has been no publicity such as would make such reunion impossible, and the world, if we resume our former life, will soon forget that we have been separated. At all events I have thought that duty and honour, however tardily obeyed, lead me to offer my future to her. She can do with it what she pleases.'

Aubrey flung the letter on the floor in passionate anger. Its sincerity he did not doubt, but the mission it placed on him was loathsome.

'Can he not go back to her without my intervention ?' he

thought bitterly. 'Must he needs call on me to rejoin his broken ties? Could he find no other messenger? Could he not write to her direct by ordinary means? What title has he to put such a burden upon me? What right, in Heaven's name, to bid me carry his soul to her and beseech her to wash it white?'

He knew that Guilderoy had written to him in all honesty and well-meaning, intending to make reparation for his suspicions by an act of perfect and even chivalrous confidence. He did justice to the motives which had dictated the letter, but he cursed the writer for its cruelty and for the task which it laid upon him. For awhile he was tempted to reject it; to send it back, with its enclosure, and say, 'I cannot be your ambassador. She is yours—go to her without preface.'

Thrice he wrote those lines, or lines similar to them; and then tore them up, dissatisfied with them as cowardice and selfishness. If he loved her as he did, should he lose any occasion of opening the gates of happiness to her? He knew that she was proud and unforgiving; that she deemed herself bound in self-respect to adhere to her choice of a lonely and self-sufficing life; he knew that Guilderoy, going to her simply because the woman whom he loved had dismissed him, would almost surely be dismissed by her with scorn and even with hatred.

Was not he, who knew this, bound to do his uttermost to stand between her and what would be to her lifelong severance from one whom she loved? to employ such means as he possessed of swaying her mind and persuading her character to bend to that forgiveness without which she would be eternally wretched? to do for her in this moment of her life what her father would certainly have done had he been living now?

He was obliged in no way, indeed, to serve her or his cousin; he could let their lives drift apart as they might, and would have no need to blame himself or fear the blame of others. But that cold neutrality seemed base to him; that withdrawing of his conscience behind the pale of what was obligation, and what was not, seemed to him poor and mean; generous natures know nothing of such cautious limitations.

'If I love thee, what is that to thee?' he thought. Nothing indeed, but to him it was much; to him it seemed to require from him as much devotion and service as though she had been wholly his. She had trusted him, entirely and innocently trusted him; to Aubrey this gave her title to his allegiance for ever.

He took up the letter for her which had been enclosed in Guilderoy's. It was left unsealed for him to read it. He did not read it, he could guess the contents; they must be, he

knew, the same that had been said to him, softened and mitigated probably, but the same in substance. He put it unread in the inner pocket of his coat and rang for his private secretary.

'I must go into the country for a day,' he said to the young man; 'there is nothing pressing at the House for the moment, and I shall be back to-morrow night in time for a division if there be one. See to these matters;' and he gave him the directions necessary for the conduct of many subjects of importance and urgency with the rapidity and clearness of explanation which becomes second nature to public men. In another hour he was in the open country, and in the midst of fields and woods bathed in pale sunshine, going towards the south-west sea-shore where the village of Christslea lay, with the swell of Atlantic rollers beating against its cliffs.

He had not seen her since the day that he had told her that he could have no mistress in any sense of love save England. He had written to her briefly from time to time, to hear of her health; but no other intercourse had taken place between them. In his letters to her he had pleaded the stress of his Parliamentary work as the reason of his absence. She understood what the true reason was, and did not urge him to visit her as she had been used to do. But the weeks and months had been more dreary, more intolerable to her, now that she had lost the one relief, the one solace, the one pleased expectancy of his occasional visits, and often she wished wistfully that she were lying insensible to all pain beside her father under the mossy turf.

The companionship and the correspondence of Aubrey had been to her a far greater happiness and consolation than she had known until they had almost ceased, or had at the best passed into an infrequent and restrained assurance of friendship. Often now as she walked to and fro the shore in the rough winds of the early spring weather, she felt with a feeling akin to terror that it was not Guilderoy but his cousin whom she missed, whom she thought of, whom she regretted. All that serious and tender solicitude for her, all that manly and generous devotion to her, although so carefully kept within the bounds of friendship and family relationship, had penetrated her inmost nature with its unselfishness and moved her to a gratitude which was in itself a form of affection. She had not been conscious of how great a place he occupied in her life until the cessation of his visits to Christslea.

She began slowly to realise, as she had never realised before, what were those dangers to her of which her father had warned her in words whose meaning she could now read by the light of her own heart. Her present was a blank, and her future was



one which terrified her. She began to realise also how frightful a thing was this utter loneliness to which she was self-condemned. There were moments when it was all that she could do to find strength to resist the impulse to cast herself headlong from the rocks, to seek the numbness and dumbness of death amongst those tossing waves in which her rosy feet had paddled in infancy, finding in them her merriest playfellows. It was the memory of her father which alone sustained her against the supreme temptation of isolated lives. She seemed to hear his voice saying to her in the words of the Athenian by whom a higher creed was reached than any priests ever taught, 'When death approaches, the mortal part dies, but the immortal part departs, safe and uncorrupted, having withdrawn itself from death.' Should she dare to put out that light of the soul with her own hand?

Her father had rightly foreseen that those friends who would serve her best in the trials of her life would be those Immortals with whom he had taught her even as a child to converse.

With the approach of the tardy English spring the burden of her days grew heavier, and their solitude more unbearable in its vacancy. When all the gladness of reviving life is coming to all animate things and to the waking earth itself, all youth which is lonely and unloved feels its isolation, and its physical and spiritual desires, with more cruel sharpness than at any other period of the year. Greenness to the grass and glory to the flower can return—why not the joys of the senses and the soul?

She knew that Aubrey had said aright; that her life was barren and unblest. Was it her own fault that it had become so? Had she lacked gentleness, sympathy, indulgence—all those unpromised gifts which love should bring unasked, and without which the bare promise of fidelity is naught. Humility had come to her, and great sadness, and contrition, and self-censure; she began to learn how hard it is to guard the gates of the soul from its tempters, how useless to pledge feelings which must change as the mind and the heart grow older, and demand more, ere they can be satisfied. She ceased to blame her husband in proportion as she ceased to care for him. Her love seemed to have died out of her with that violent and delirious jealousy which once had moved her so absolutely, and now seemed dead as last year's leaves.

It was a balmy and sunny afternoon when Aubrey reached Christ'slea. The cattle, released from their stalls, were straying at will on moor and pasture. The first fisher fleet of the spring-time was visible in the offing, red-brown sails against a silvery-blue sky. The orchards were all in blossom in a sweet confusion of rose and white. The pigeons flew above the boughs and the

sea-gulls flew above the waves. It was all soft, cool, pale, and fresh ; English in its sobriety and simplicity of tint, and with the haze and the scent of the morrow's rain in the air. She was standing in the orchard when he put his hand on the latch of the gate. A joy of which she was wholly unconscious broke over the sadness of her face like sunshine as she saw him and came towards him.

'It is so long since you were here !' she said, holding out both her hands to him.

He took them in his own, but did not hold them for more than a moment.

'Yes, it is long,' he said, with a sigh.

All that welcome and affection speaking in her face were to him as the sight of a spring of clear water to a tired wayfarer who cannot reach to drink of it.

'Have you missed me ?' he asked involuntarily.

A shiver passed over her as she stood in the pale sunshine.

'Very much,' she answered simply.

He was silent.

Then he said abruptly, 'Let us go up on the cliff ; I have something to tell you which will be best told by your father's grave. Besides, under all these blossoms and boughs one cannot breathe.'

'I will go where you wish,' she said ; her new-born happiness was startled and overshadowed. She had a presentiment of ill.

They walked almost in silence out of the orchard, and across the stretch of rough grass-land which parted it from the cliff-path which Guilderoy a few months earlier had seen her ascend. It was early in the afternoon, and the silence was unbroken around them ; the air was sweet and strong, the sea calm. They crossed the head of the cliff until they reached a seat under the churchyard wall, shaded by the evergreen hedge and the yews and pines of its enclosure.

'We will wait here,' said Aubrey. 'You can see the sea ; it is always your friend and counsellor.'

The graveyard, with its tall and slender marble pillar rising above the evergreen foliage and the light, silvery, shadowy wands of blossoming willows, was behind them, and before them, far below, the grey and tranquil waters of the bay.

'I have this letter to bring to you from Evelyn,' he said, and took out the note addressed to her and offered it to her.

As she recognised the handwriting she grew very pale, and an expression that was almost terror came into her eyes.

'He has no right, no right whatever, to address me,' she said, and made a gesture to refuse the letter. It fell on the turf between them.

Aubrey stooped for it and offered it to her again.

‘He has every right,’ he said coldly, ‘and you are bound to read whatever he says to you. Do not be either obstinate or ungenerous.’

‘It is you who are ungenerous to me.’

‘Do not let us quarrel, my dear,’ said Aubrey, in the words which Beatrice Soria had used to Guilderoy. ‘Life is painful enough without dissension. I bid you read this letter, first because I know the contents, and know that they are such as you are bound to consider, and because, in the second place, as I have been made the bearer of it, he would think that I had betrayed my trust if you refused.’

She was silent some moments ; then she took the envelope from his hand, and opened it and read what it contained.

She read it rapidly, guessing rather than perusing its sentences.

‘Aubrey will tell you better than I can write to you what it is I ask from you after these many months of silence and separation. Do not think, my dear, that I would urge for a moment any rights that the law may give me when I have morally forfeited them ; and do not think that I would seek to persuade or to solicit you. I tell you frankly, the woman I love, for whom I left you, loves me no more. This avowal is the greatest proof of my sincerity and of my humility that I can give to you. I make you no grand protestations, but, if you care to do so, our life together might be renewed, with every wish on my part to make it happier for you than the past has been. Marriage is the cruellest of all mistakes, and I cannot ever regret enough that I led into its captivity your innocent and ignorant youth. I can only say that the error was made by me in all good faith, and that if I have been untrue to my promises to you and to your father, I have always been so without premeditation and with self-reproach which has been more poignant than you would consent to believe. I have offended you, and I will not seek to palliate my offence by saying, as I perhaps might say with some show of self-justification, that you did not give me either that sympathy or that indulgence which I had hoped for from you. It is enough to say now that if you care to do so I am willing to begin our lives afresh.’

The letter was manly, sincere, and plainly written from the heart ; it would have touched and won any woman who had loved him into forgiveness of faults even much graver than his had been ; but it did not touch hers because the feeling which had bound her to him was dead, and a dead thing can return neither cry nor caress. She read it. Then she threw it again on the ground.

‘He comes to me because she has dismissed him !’ she cried

with violence, her nostrils dilated and quivering like those of a blood-mare under the spur.

'It is at least honest of him to tell you so. He could easily have affected to you that he abandoned her for your sake. Believe me, candour in a man of the world to women, and about women, is the very rarest of all qualities.'

She turned on him with passionate indignation and suffering.

'You defend him; you always defend him! Why should he choose *you* as his messenger? Has he not hurt me enough already?'

Aubrey passed over the admission which was confessed in her words.

'He chose me because he had been unjust to me and wished to give me this mark of his confidence,' he replied, with that self-negation which he had imposed on himself when he had accepted the mission to her. 'I do not defend his past conduct. He knows all that I think of it. But I am compelled in honour to say now, that I believe he desires fully to make such reparation to you as may be in his power.'

'Because the Duchess Soria has wearied of him!'

'Not only because of that. He is neither heartless nor conscienceless, and he felt bitterly months ago that he had been false to his promises to your father. I think you may believe what he says now the more fully because he makes no protest of feelings which do not move him, and which would be even an insult offered to you at this moment, however the future may renew them in both of you.'

'They will be never renewed. *Their* love was renewed because it had once been great; but between him and me there has never been such love—never, never! A year ago it would have made me glad,' she said wearily. 'I should perhaps have scorned myself, as I told you that I should do, but I should have been happy. Not now. He has waited too long. What does he think I am that I should be willing to meet him after all these months?'

'He thinks you are what you are—his wife.'

'He set me free from that bond when he left me.'

'Your father would not have said so.'

'But I say so. Go you and tell him so. Why does he seek to return to me? Not out of real remorse, nor any tenderness; only because he is proud and he knows that the world blames him.'

'You are too harsh.'

'Truth is harsh.'

He felt a mad longing to lift her in his arms and bear her far away from all their world before his cousin could reach there to claim her. For a moment all the soft pale sunshine seemed

to him red as blood, and the beating of the sea upon the sands like the throbs of the many human hearts sounding in agonised revolt against the brutalities and the hypocrisies of social law.

'If he had written it a year ago—six months ago—it would have made me happy. I would have forgiven all—ah! what do I say? love always forgives because it *is* love. Now I cannot forgive because I have ceased to care! Why does he come to me when it is too late? Go, tell him so. It is too late! too late!'

'It is never too late for a woman's mercy——'

'Mercy! What mercy would there be in a feigned welcome? What is the body without the soul? What use to give him myself when I cannot give him my affections?'

'You will give them again when you have seen him once more. You are dreaming of coldness and of harshness that you do not feel——'

'I have ceased to dream long ago. I know what life is too well. Dreams are for the happy.'

'Surely on your side——'

'Yes; I loved him as one loves when one is very young; but it is dead in me; it is dead, dead, dead, I tell you, like any skeleton of any drowned creature that lies at the bottom of that sea!'

Aubrey turned from her, and walked to and fro upon the turf before her. The pain of the moment was almost beyond his strength, well tutored though it was.

'You think so,' he said after a long pause; 'you think so, because you are hurt, indignant, and even more outraged at his solicitation of forgiveness than you were by his original desertion. But this will pass away. You once loved my cousin with passion if not with wisdom; he is not a man whom women forget. When he comes to you, you will consent to what he wishes; you will pass over those eighteen months of bitterness, you will only remember that you were once devoted to him, and that he was the man who taught you the first meaning of love, and was the father of your dead children.'

'No, no, no!' she said with violence. 'No—for ever no! His place is empty in my heart. There is a stone there; no warmth, no desire, no remembrance; only a stone, the stone which has the seal of oblivion, the stone that you set on a grave!'

She threw herself on her knees beside the wooden bench and buried her face in her hands, and sobbed with the convulsive weeping which he had seen once before.

'Why could I not meet you first! You would have been true to me!' she cried in the passion of her tears; not knowing what she said, knowing only that a great nature was wasted on her in vain, without joy to itself or gladness to her.

Aubrey sighed; his features changed and his eyes filled with an unspeakable yearning.

He saw that her heart in its indignation, its solitude, its want of sympathy, and its recognition of sympathy, both of feeling and of temperament, in him, turned towards him instinctively as a beaten child turns to those who will soothe and caress it. He saw that with but little effort he could detach her from what still remained in her of love for his cousin, and lead her humiliated and lonely soul to his, there to find comfort if not joy. He knew that he had in him the power to console her, the heart which could alone meet and content her own; but he knew, too, that it rested with him to awake her to this knowledge or to let it slumber in her unaroused for ever. He had never before deemed it possible. He had been wholly sincere when he had told his cousin that she cared nothing for himself. But in this moment, in her whole attitude, in the tears she wept, in the broken words she muttered, he realised that it would not be a task beyond his powers to make her see in him more than a friend, to lead her from gratitude to other and warmer emotions, to suggest to her that the greatest chastisement which a woman can take upon a faithless love is to find and make her life's happiness without it. For a moment all his heart and all his senses made the temptation more than he had strength to bear; but with an instant's meditation he found force to resist.

'I should not have loved you in that way, my dear,' he said, with a lie which was more heroic than any truth. 'Long ago I loved one woman madly, and she was false to me. I would have told you my story before now, but I never thought that you would care to hear it. I gave to her all that a man can give, and she rewarded me by the lowest of intrigues, the foulest of infidelities. I was very young when she robbed my life of all its colour and warmth, and left me only such cold consolation as may lie in the pursuit of public duties. But she closed my heart to passion for ever. I can feel affection and devotion—I feel them both for you—but nothing beyond those. Do not think of me ever as a lover for any living woman. The only mistress I shall ever have, in any sense of love, is England.'

His voice was low and grave, and infinitely tender; his declaration was an untruth, but it was nobler than all truth.

'Even were it otherwise with me,' he said wearily, 'I could not, I would not risk the accusation from my cousin and the world that I had abused his trust in me, that I had taken advantage of his absence and your loneliness. I may mistake, and think that honour in me which is only selfishness; but this is what I feel and what would guide me if—if—you were still dearer to me than you are.'

He paused, and his deep and laboured breathing sounded painfully upon the country silence round them.

'And if,' he added, 'if I be so urgent with you to receive Guilderoy and reunite your life to his, it is because I feel that in the earliest years of our acquaintance I perhaps did wrong in enlisting your confidence and giving you my sympathy. I often now blame myself; I perhaps helped to alienate you from him. I perhaps turned towards myself sympathies and confidences which, had I not been there, might have found their way in time to him. I ask you, dear, to take this remorse from me. He has many lovable qualities; he has many high talents; he feels sincerely towards you, if not warmly; you may make his future such as his boyhood promised, if you care for him.'

'But I do *not* care!'

She rose to her feet; her features were stern and scornful, her eyes were full of passionate feeling burning through their tears; he seemed to her as cruel as Guilderoy had been, as the world had been, as life had been; caring nothing for her, and her pain, and her fate; caring only for the world's opinion and a man's egotism, and the mere pride of race.

'Then I have more remorse than I thought, or than I have strength to bear,' he said, as his eyes met hers for one moment in that regard which strips bare the heart and unveils the inmost soul.

Without another word, or any sign even of farewell, he turned away from her and went with rapid steps across the grass-land and down the pathway of the cliff.

She stood motionless and looked after him, her eyes wistfully searching the vacant air long after he had passed from sight.

The spring night was cold and the dews falling heavily when she left the place where her father lay, and returned with slow and tired steps to the house.

She had her husband's letter in her hand. When she reached her chamber, she read it again and again, trying to awake with it one chord of the music which was silent in her soul.

Life seemed to her hard, conventional, artificial, hateful.

One man left her because his honour was dearer to him than she was; and one man returned to her because he was uneasy whilst the world thought ill of him.

What was the worth of love or friendship if they quailed before the opinions of others?

What use were the beauty, and the heart, and the mind of a woman if they could inspire nothing more than that?

She passed the hours of the night walking to and fro that narrow bedchamber where she had slept as a child, hearing the hoarse notes of the village clock record the dreary passing of the time.

## CHAPTER LVIII.

THAT night Guilderoy was in his house in Paris, the prey to many conflicting feelings which banished the carelessness and ease with which his nature had hitherto met the complexities of human life.

He was not sure whether he most wished or most feared his wife's acceptance of his offer. He had been entirely honest in all that he had written to her and to his cousin; but he dreaded the results of it with that shrinking from all pain and all obligation which had always been so strong in him.

He could not dismiss the anxiety which governed him; he could not eat or sleep, or seek his usual distractions in this city which was so familiar and so pleasant to him; he was restless under the sense which haunted him of the inevitable scorn with which Aubrey would regard his vacillations and his confidence, and he already repented the impulse which had made him select his cousin as his intercessor.

He wished that he had gone himself without any preparation or mediation to Christ's-lea as the day and the night wore onward, and each succeeding hour might bring him a message from Aubrey.

His heart ached for the first time in his life under a wound which could not be closed or stilled by any anodyne of pleasure. The humiliation with which the dismissal of the woman he loved had filled him would not pass away for many a year; perhaps never.

He was conscious that she had weighed him in the scales of her fine intelligence and found him wanting; he knew that he had failed to respond to her imagination; he knew, too, that what she had ceased to give to him she might give to others. He had been weary, dissatisfied, and haunted by remorse when with her, but without her his existence was a blank and his soul torn by a vague but intolerable jealousy.

He who had never before known that passion which is the companion of unhappy love was now, if it be possible to be so, jealous at once of two women whose affections he had possessed utterly, and yet whom he had both, through his own inconstancy and vacillation, lost; and for the first time in his whole life neither his careless philosophy nor his swiftly changing caprices could solace him or build up anew the cloud-palace of amorous content. He was dissatisfied with himself. All that was best and most spiritual in him condemned him in his own eyes. He



could have defended his conduct easily to others, but he could not defend it to himself.

It was dawn in the streets of Paris, and birds were twittering in the lime-trees beneath his window when his servant brought him the telegram he was expecting from his cousin.

He tore it open nervously.

‘I have done what you asked,’ said Aubrey in it. ‘I have no mandate from her, but I believe it will be as you wish. Go yourself.’

Was he glad or not? He could not tell. He was conscious of a weight of duties and obligations which rolled back like a stone over his life; but he was also conscious of that relief which comes from a choice finally resolved and a conscience quieted and appeased. Amidst all the chaos of his thoughts he was touched to admiration of Aubrey’s generosity and loyalty. Not one man in ten million would have accepted such a task, or, accepting it, would have executed it to the end with perfect self-abnegation. He could not have reached such stoical nobility himself; but he recognised the greatness of it.

‘I shall go to England this morning,’ he said to his people; and as he spoke the door of his room opened and his sister entered. She had arrived that moment in Paris, and had come there without changing her clothes, taking an hour’s sleep, or even breaking her fast.

He saw her with displeasure. They had not met since the late summer which had followed John Vernon’s death; and the remembrance of her letters which he had read in Venice was fresh and hateful in him.

She seemed ever to him like a bird of evil omen, watching and waiting till the corpse of some dead human happiness fell to her. And yet she was what the world called a good woman—pious, chaste, virtuous and wise.

‘Why are you here?’ he said with impatience and discourtesy, making no affectation of a welcome which he could not give or of a pleasure which he could not feel.

‘Is that all the greeting you give me after all these months?’

‘I cannot pretend what I do not feel,’ he said irritably. ‘I am sure that you would not come to me thus, unannounced, unsummoned, unless you had some bad news to bring or some cruel suspicion to suggest.’

‘You are unjust’—her voice was broken, her lips quivered; she was tired, cold, and unnerved; in her own way she loved him, and she felt that even such affection as he had ever felt for her was gone.

‘I am not unjust,’ he answered coldly. ‘You have never ceased to irritate and alienate me. You mean well, perhaps,

but if you have the intentions of a saint, you have the insinuations of a fiend. I received all your letters in Italy. I never answered them because they offended and disgusted me. You always hated my wife. You recognised the fineness of her nature, but you never ceased to be pitiless to her. I do not know it; but, I am as certain as that we stand here, that it was you who informed her of my relations, before my marriage, with the only woman I ever loved.'

'I thought it right that she should know of them,' replied his sister, who was never without courage. 'And those same relations renewed after marriage have been made public to everyone by yourself.'

'What is that to you?' said Guilderoy, white with ill-controlled passion. 'You are not my keeper. It is nothing to you what I do. You are a good woman—oh yes'—and you make your virtues into a sheaf of poisoned arrows with which you slay the lives of others. What did you write—what did you dare to write—to me in Venice and elsewhere? You slandered Aubrey, whom the whole country respects; you slandered my wife, whose first and staunchest friend you ought to have been; and you insinuated to me suspicions which might very easily, had I been either more credulous or more hot-tempered, have ended in bloodshed between my cousin and myself, or at the best in a public quarrel which would have disgraced us both. That is what you call goodness, sincerity, affection! God deliver me from them and send me sinners; sinners of every sin under heaven, but with sympathy in them and generosity and mercy!'

She was silent for a moment. She had never seen him so fully roused, so reckless in denunciation; she loved him greatly, and she felt in every word the severance one by one of the ties of consanguinity and habit which had bound them together.

But she was a woman who was pitiless in pursuit of her purpose; unchangeable in her opinions and her conduct, unrelenting in her tyranny and curiosity and meddlesome inquisition into the lives and thoughts of others.

'I pass over your insults and your ingratitude,' she said, with difficulty controlling the rage she felt. 'I wish only to ask you one question. I have come from England to ask it. I heard by chance that you were in Paris. Is it true that you intend to effect a reconciliation with your wife?'

'Who told you that I do so?'

'No one told me. But I have heard its possibility discussed, vaguely, in society.'

'Well? What then?'

'You cannot mean it? You could not drag your name in the dust? Your severance from her was bad enough; but your

reconciliation to her would be worse, ten million times worse. It is not to be thought of, not to be dreamed of, for one instant! You owe it to your whole family!’

‘What do I owe to my family?’

He had grown quite calm; his violence had spent itself, but she, who had known him from his earliest years, knew that this tranquillity had more real menace and sterner meaning in it.

But she had never quailed before the fury of any of the men related to her whom she had tortured, fatigued, and injured for their good, as their good was seen by her.

‘You owe it to your family,’ she replied, ‘to your family and to yourself, not to take again into your life before the world a woman who has lived as your wife has done in your absence.’

‘How has she lived?’

‘How? As no woman in her senses could have lived. Withdrawn from everyone; herself a mark for the most odious suspicions, receiving no visits save from one man whose name already had often been connected with hers. You used to be proud, you used to care beyond all things for your name—what will the whole world say of you if, after more than a year and a half of such a life as that, Lady Guilderoy is once more admitted into your houses and your heart?’

Guilderoy looked at her; and, bold woman though she was, she was afraid of the effects of her words.

He smiled slightly; his smile was very bitter and very contemptuous.

‘If you only came here to say this,’ he said, ‘it was a pity you did not remain in England. I should then at least have been able to forget all that you wrote to me in Italy. You are a virtuous woman, but you are a cruel woman. If you had any mercy in you, you would have been stirred to compassion for Gladys; you would have gone to her, you would have counselled her, you would have set the shield of your unblemished position between the world and her. Even if you had hated her, still you should have done so for my sake. Aubrey alone did what he could. I am grateful to him. Whoever hints a word against him is my enemy. The mistake made by Gladys was the mistake of an imaginative, unworldly, and over-sensitive nature; but it was a noble mistake—one which none but an ignoble nature could possibly misjudge. I am blamable in much, but I am not utterly vile. I offended her, and, if life permits it to me, I will atone to her. It never occurred to me as possible that the world could blame her for my fault. Possibly it would never have dared to do so had not you been the first to cast a stone at her.’

‘Are you the dupe of your wife as you have been of others?’

‘I am no one’s dupe, except my own sometimes. And now

you will pardon me if I leave you. The house of course is yours to stay in if you choose. But I am about to leave for England, and you will pardon me if I say that I wish to go alone. Short as the journey is, it would be too long for me to make it in the society of one who is the unkindest enemy of myself and of those who are dear to me.'

'What! Does the devotion of a lifetime count for nothing? Are those dear to you whom you forsook, and by whom you have been betrayed? Do you utterly forget all my affection, all my forgiveness, all my defence of your errors in the world, for sake of a woman whom you are tired of one day and idealise the next, only because she no longer cares what you do?'

'My good sister,' said Guilderoy, with something of his old manner, 'I told you long ago that you were equally discontented with me whether I took the paths of vice or the paths of virtue, to use the jargon of the world's very arbitrary and rather senseless classifications. You were indignant when I left my wife. You are indignant now that it is possible I may return to her. I do not see that in either case you have any title to be my judge; and I regret to feel that you have forfeited the power to be my friend.'

With that he left her; and she, mortified, worsted, and made impotent as an arbiter of fate, broke down into a fit of woman-like and heartbroken weeping.

She recalled the voice of John Vernon saying in the summer stillness of his garden, 'Be kind to her.' She knew that she had been more than not kind; that she had been cruel, that she had deserted her, injured her, and been the first to lead the world to see harm and disgrace in the solitude of that simple life at Christsea. Fool that she had been to let her prejudice and jealousy warp her judgment so utterly! Fool that she had been not to have had sense and penetration enough to foresee that the time would come when her brother would resent as a dishonour done to himself all slur and suspicion cast through her upon the innocence of his wife!

Her pride at last realised that she had no influence over those she strove to move; no wisdom in her interference, no place in the hearts of those she loved; she saw at last her own soul as it truly was, with curiosity in the guise of friendship, harshness in the mask of justice, meddlesome and vexatious authority in the form of affection, unconscious jealousy and malignity in the golden robes of virtue.

## CHAPTER LIX.

A WHOLE day and yet another sleepless night had passed with Gladys in that wretchedness of uncertainty in which the soul is like a house divided against itself. All that was noblest in her urged her to do what Aubrey had begged of her ; all that was human, weak, passionate and selfish refused to do it.

She understood why marriage, which is so burdensome and so unrequited to the man, is to the woman so great an emancipation and enrichment. Yet were she only free now—only a child as she had been when Guilderoy had found her on the moors ! And she remembered bitterly that, even if she were so, the world would only see in her feeling for Aubrey ambition and acquisitiveness, as it had seen it in her marriage ; and the voice of her father seemed to rebuke her, saying, as he had often said, in the words of Socrates to Crito, ‘Is it worth while to think so much of the opinion of others ?’

No, it was not worth while ; all the natural nobility of her nature recognised the nobility of Aubrey’s words and acts ; but, womanlike, their austerity, commanding her admiration, left her heart cold ; womanlike, she would have fain had him think less of his honour, more of her. An infinite regret, which she knew would abide with her so long as ever she should have life, weighed on her for the pain which she had brought on him through her unthinking acceptance of his devotion and her too selfish appeals to him. And yet it seemed to her that after all he loved her but little ! Women can never accept or understand the feeling which places honour before themselves. It only hurts them.

With the contradiction of human wishes, the simple secluded life of Christlea, which had seemed hardly better than a living death, grew dear to her. The even and monotonous time, the empty house, the homely ways, seemed safe and peaceful. Beside the troubled course of passions, of pleasures, and of pains which make up the life of the world, her residence in this little seaside hamlet appeared serene and secure as the haven of a religious house appeared to those who, after the deceptions of love and the temptations of power, withdrew themselves to Port Royal or La Trappe. Its dreariness, its vacancy, the despair before it which had often seized her in its long moonless winter nights, when the silence of snow was all around, and in its grey melancholy summer evenings, when the hoot of the owl alone answered the lapping of the waves, all

these passed away from her mind ; she only remembered that here she had known that freedom from fresh and poignant pangs which seemed to her the nearest approach to happiness that fate would ever give to her.

She shrank from all which return to her life with her husband must mean for her. She was wholly honest ; and accepting what he offered, she knew that she must fulfil all her obligations to him. Some women might have made a feint of forgiveness only to acquire the means to wound, to irritate, to chastise, to mortify him ; but any such treachery as that was impossible to the daughter of John Vernon. Returning to her life at Ladysrood must, she knew, mean for her the resumption of all those ties from which she had for nearly two years looked upon herself as freed.

She could do nothing meanly. As her severance from him had been complete and uncompromising, so she knew that her reunion with him must be entire, and her acceptance of him faithful in the spirit as well as in the letter. Only a year ago it would have made her so happy to have given that which he sought ! Though she had scorned the suggestion of reconciliation with her lips, she had often yearned for it in her heart ; but now—now it was too late to give her any possible joy ; she shrank from its necessity with both her body and her mind.

‘What am I to do ? What shall I choose ?’ she asked herself, with passionate anxiety to make the choice which should be right in her father’s sight and Aubrey’s. The one was dead, the other absent ; but both seemed very close to her through all these hours, both seemed at once her counsellors and her judges.

At times she remembered Guilderoy as he had been in the first weeks of their life together, and then a shudder passed over her, thinking that all those ecstasies, those adorations, those entreaties lavished on her then, had all been given since to others ; and at such moments the quiet chamber, the unbroken solitude of this little cottage seemed to her the ‘haven under the hill,’ like that which sheltered the storm-tossed fisher-boats of Christslea where the cliffs curved inward facing the setting sun.

She passed the chief portion of the day pacing to and fro under the willows and yews where the marble column said of him whose mortal frame lay underneath it, shut within the earth, that death comes kindly to those by whom death has never been desired. The swallows flew in and out of the quiet place, building their nests in the eaves and gables of the church. The soft pale sunbeams fell through the dark shadows of the yew-trees and the grey plumes of the willows. Now and then some cry of a fisherman to another from the shore came faintly

on the air ; and the broad white wing of a curlew brushed the topmost boughs of the churchyard trees. When she left her father's grave it was again evening ; calm and colourless and sad as English evenings are, it seemed like the reflection of her own soul. Her choice was made.

It was late in the afternoon of the third day when she entered the woods of Ladysrood.

They were in all the delicate and lovely greenery of their first foliage. The bracken and ferns were waving breast high, and the birds were singing in the brushwood of the undergrowth and in the branches of elm, oak, and beech. The ground was blue in many a nook with pimpernel and the wild hyacinth. Across the grassy drives ever and again a deer bounded or a hare scudded. He had never cared for sport as other men care, and his woods and forests were for the most part the peaceful haunts of unmolested woodland creatures. She thought dreamily of the old story of Griseldis ; had Griseldis, when her triumph came, lost the love out of her heart which had borne her through all her trials ? Had she, when bidden to return to her kingdom, lost all wish for it, and only felt the heaviness of the burden she was summoned to take up, the weight and imprisonment of the reunion ?

Likely enough ; likely enough that Griseldis had been a happier woman in her misery, when hope and love had still been with her, than in her return to her palace and her pomp.

She passed through all the sunshine and stillness and fragrance of the dewy glades, and entered those great gardens of the south-west, in which the rose-walk was where her father had bade her have patience, and Aubrey had said the same words to her : words which had seemed to her then so cold, so commonplace, so barren.

She saw the stately evergreen avenue, the long aisles of the berceaux, the wide stone flights of the terrace steps, and the western front of the house, its buttresses and casements hung and garlanded with pink and golden banksia in full flower ; and for a little while she could not see them for the tears which blinded her eyes. There her father had stood with her in the summer night and had said to her :

'It lies with you to retain three angels which stand about the throne of life—honour, unselfishness, and sympathy.'

The men at work as she passed and the two servants who were idling on the terraces recognised her, and saluted her humbly, and were startled and afraid to see her there.

She bade them send the housekeeper to her.

'My lord returns to-morrow. Prepare everything,' she said briefly. The old woman kissed her hand and murmured trembling, 'The Lord be thanked !'

Gladys looked at her with a strange look. 'Will it be well or ill?' she thought, and said no more; but entered the house where she was mistress, and uncovered her head, and sat down by one of the windows, and gazed out at the gardens smiling in the western sun. An infinite peace seemed to lie like a benediction on the great house in its silence and fragrance and majesty. But there was no peace in her heart.

'My father will be content, if he knows,' she thought.

She could not think of his soul as dead, as ignorant or as careless of her fate.

She rose after awhile and went up the staircase to her own apartments, Kenneth and the other dogs following her with soft noiseless tread; they knew the place again, but the change to it troubled them. She let the women take off her the rough serge gown she wore, symbol of the freedom and the solitude she relinquished, and clothe her in one of the many gowns which she had left there; a gown of pale grey velvet, embroidered with silver threads, with old laces at the throat and arms. As she looked at the worn folds of the serge skirt, with all its stains of sea-sand and of wet grasses, she sighed as Griseldis may have done, despite all, when she put off her peasant's kirtle for the regal robe once more.

With the old worn gown she put away from her for ever liberty of the affections, liberty of the actions, liberty even of the thoughts; for she was very loyal, and giving herself once more she gave her undivided allegiance.

She clasped a necklace about her throat, a necklace of old Venetian gold-work which he had given her in the early days of their stay in Venice, and turned from the mirror feeling as though a score of years had gone since she had last stood before it there. Then she descended the stairs, where the afternoon sun still streamed through the painted windows across the broad steps and the oaken balustrade.

She went slowly, feeling as though she dragged a dead body with her; the amber glow of the late afternoon shining on the silvery softness of the velvet and the gold chainwork of the necklace as she moved. The house was flooded with that rich light, that evening splendour, that fragrance from blossoming gardens and from dewy woodlands; it seemed to make a festival with its beauty and its odours and its colour for her as she moved.

But her face was white, her step was reluctant, her heart sick. For she knew that he was on his way thither, and would soon rejoin her. Even her return to Ladysrood would be attributed by the world to coarse and selfish reasons; and the remembrance of that imputation of low motives which the world is sure to cast on high emotions, must ever be to the nature



which is above the herd a loathsome and galling remembrance.

She looked at a portrait by Watts of Aubrey which hung in the picture-gallery. It seemed to gaze at her with eyes which had life in them, and its lips seemed to utter an eternal farewell. They would meet as friends and relatives; they would meet perforce and continually, but the old sweet intimacy was over for ever.

It left an immense loss, an immense void, in her life which she had no belief that the future could ever fill.

She wandered through the long succession of rooms and galleries, and halls and corridors; the places were all so familiar, yet so strange to her; like the dogs, she was troubled by a divided sense of exile and of return; after the little lowly chambers and lonely shores of Christslea, Ladysrood seemed a palace for a queen. Her husband had given it all to her; he had found her poor and obscure and had enriched her with all he possessed. She had never cared for these things indeed in any vulgar or avaricious sense, but absence from them had taught her to measure their value in the eyes of others, and to understand why her father, least worldly of all men, had said to her that the greatness of Guilderoy's gifts demanded from her gratitude and fealty.

She entered the drawing-rooms of the western wing, where the last glow of the sunset was lighting up with crimson reflections all the beauty and luxury of the apartments.

She walked to and fro them in their solitude, bidding the servants leave the windows open to the evening air, which came in cool and damp and full of the fragrance of spring flowers and spring woodlands.

It was the last breath of the life which she had given up and left for ever.

Henceforward she would live in the world, for the world, of the world; Guilderoy, she knew, would never lead any other existence; the burden of its artificiality, the cruelty of its crowds, the sameness of its pleasures, seemed to weigh on her already with that monotony and that irritation which she had always found in them.

The hours passed on; the day altered into night; the servants came and lighted all the waxlights in the sconces and chandeliers of the suite of rooms. She stood by one of the still open windows looking out at the shadows of the west garden, listening to the peaceful splashing of the fountains falling in the fishponds under the trees.

She could hear her own heart beat in the stillness. She knew that he had returned, and must soon come to her.

Tenderness and bitterness strove together in her soul; she

remembered her father's words spoken in that chamber, and she acknowledged their nobility and beauty; but she also remembered the words with which Guilderoy had there declared to her that he had never loved her and loved another woman.

'Why drag the chain between us when it is pain to both?' she thought; and her memory went to Aubrey.

The evening became night; the curfew-bell which was still rung at Ladysrood tolled from the clock-tower, the air grew colder and had the sweet breath of a million of primroses and hyacinths in it.

In the stillness and sweetness of it, Guilderoy stood before her. He looked older, paler, more weary than he had done when he had left her there eighteen months before; he had suffered both in his passions and in his pride; he had judged himself, and the world had judged him, and the woman he loved had judged him, and he and they had alike condemned him. Would this other woman whom he did not love, but in whose hand the conventional honour of his name was placed by the conventional laws of the world, condemn him also? She looked at him and made no gesture or movement which could assist him; her face was cold, and her eyes were passionless.

He crossed the room and kissed her hand with his accustomed grace and with a ceremonious and serious courtesy.

His lips were as cold as the hand which they touched.

'I thank you,' he said simply. The words cost him much to utter; he felt the unresponding and fixed gaze of her eyes upon him, and the warmer impulses, the more tender repentance, with which he had entered her presence froze under them.

'You have nothing to thank me for,' she said coldly. 'You have asked me to return to you for the world's sake, and for the world's sake I have accepted.'

'Only for that?' he said, with hesitation, perplexed and troubled.

'For that, and for my promise to my father. I said that I would never bring evil repute upon his name and yours, and I will not.'

'But have you no other feeling? None for me?' The words escaped him almost unconsciously, and there was an accent of emotion, almost of entreaty in them.

'No; none now.'

The answer was sad and immutable as death.

His face flushed as he heard it.

'Had you ever any?' he asked her.

'Oh yes;' she sighed as she spoke, and her eyes softened and darkened with many memories. 'I loved you greatly, I have suffered greatly; but I do not love you now, nor have you power to pain me. I was a child when I loved you; I am a

woman now. I will be honest with you. I do not care, I shall never care; but I will be to you what you wish; and the world—the world of which he and you think so much!—shall never know that it is so, and your honour shall be as dear to me as though you were dear.’

He heard her with profound humiliation, with unspeakable pain. He had believed her cold, but he had thought that, so far as she had loved at all, her heart had been always with him. He had come to her in repentance, in wistful desire for peace, in a vague hope of he knew not what new kind of happiness; and he found the chambers of her soul closed to him, and occupied, possibly, by another.

He had nerved himself to bend to what was an act of humiliation and supplication; and, unknown to himself, he had looked in return for the tenderness and sweetness of reconciliation, even of welcome.

‘I know,’ he murmured wearily, ‘that my offences against you have been many and great.’

‘It is not that. I have learned to know that they were natural enough. I was nothing to you; others were much. In the beginning I did not understand you; I did not know anything of men’s natures or of their passions. I must have fatigued you, been insufficient for you; that I can understand. My father always told me I was to blame, that I had not indulgence.’

‘Your father was merciful as a god always and to all. He would tell you to be indulgent now.’

‘Yes; I know that he would. I know that he would condemn me more than he would you.’

He gazed at her in silence; she was still so young that even suffering had had no power to mar her great personal beauty; her face was colourless and calm, her eyes full of unspeakable sadness, her attitude unconsciously one of dignity and rebuke. Vaguely he felt that it was possible he should some day love this woman hopelessly since she no more loved him.

‘If you have ceased to care for me,’ he said almost inaudibly, ‘I cannot complain; I have only caused you suffering and mortification. I have told you that I will endeavour to atone in the future; but there is no reason why you should believe me.’

‘I believe that you mean it now.’

‘But you have no faith in my constancy of purpose? Why should you have any? Yet I am sincere.’

Her eyes rested on him musingly, and softened as they gazed.

‘I do believe you, but I cannot give you the welcome you wished,’ she said wearily. ‘I cannot, I cannot lie. If you had come back to me a year ago I should have rejoiced; I loved

you then—ah! why can I not now? Where is it all gone? Why did you leave me alone?’

‘You were not alone! You had Aubrey! And what you deny to me you gave to him!’

She shrank from the name as if he had stabbed her with it.

‘That is ungenerous,’ she murmured. ‘He has been loyalty itself to you; only a day ago he pleaded for you with all his might and blamed me; neither my life nor yours is worth one hour of his!’

Violent words rose to Guilderoy’s lips, but he repressed them with great effort; the justice and the generosity which were in his nature beneath all the egotism of long self-indulgence conquered the passion of jealousy and of offence which stirred his life to its very centre. After all, what right had he to blame or to judge? What title had he left to speak of his right to her affections?’

‘The fault of all is mine,’ he said with great emotion. ‘I left you in a position of the greatest peril: if you had injured me in any way I should but have had what I merited. If you love me no more, if you love a greater and a better man, how dare I blame you? I, who so soon ceased to love you! My poor child, believe me at least in this—from my heart I beseech you to pardon me the mad caprice in which I bound your fate to mine. I thought that you would be content, like so many women, with all the material pleasures of the world or of rank and of wealth; I forgot that you were your father’s daughter, and that those could have no power to console you when your heart was seared and your pride was wounded. Forgive me, dear!’

He knelt at her feet as he spoke, and he kissed the hem of her skirts. She passed her hand over his hair with the same gesture, half of tenderness, half of pity, which Beatrice Sorìa had used.

A sigh which came from her soul’s depths breathed over him where he knelt.

‘I forgive you, I hope, and you must forgive me,’ she said gently. ‘Do not ask more of me yet.’

A few months later the country learned that Lord Aubrey had accepted a distant and arduous Viceroyalty, and, in its coarse foolishness, it envied him his greatness.





*Maud Muller*

## "It Might Have Been"

Her Joy was Duty  
And Love was Law.

— "rightest poetic gems. P.T.O.

## MAUD MULLER.

MAUD MULLER, on a summer's day, raked the meadow sweet with hay.  
 Beneath her torn hat glowed the wealth of simple beauty and rustic health.  
 Singing, she wrought, and her merry glee the mock-bird echoed from his tree.  
 But when she glanced to the far-off town, white from its hill-slope looking down,  
 The sweet song died, and a vague unrest and a nameless longing filled her breast,—  
 A wish, that she hardly dare to own, for something better than she had known.  
 The Judge rode slowly down the lane, smoothing his horse's chestnut mane.  
 He drew his bridle in the shade of the apple-trees to greet the maid,  
 And asked a draught from the spring that flowed through the meadow across the road.  
 She stooped where the cool spring bubbled up, and filled for him her small tin cup,  
 And blushed as she gave it, looking down on her feet so bare, and her tattered gown.  
 "Thanks!" said the Judge; "a sweeter draught from a fairer hand was never quaffed."  
 He spoke of the grass and flowers and trees, of the singing birds and the humming bees;  
 Then talked of the haying, and wondered whether the cloud in the west would bring foul  
 And Maud forgot her brier-torn gown, and her graceful ankles bare and brown [weather.  
 And listened, while a pleased surprise looked from her long-lashed hazel eyes.  
 At last, like one who for delay seeks a vain excuse, he rode away.  
 Maud Muller looked and sighed: "Ah me! That I the Judge's bride might be!  
 "He would dress me up in silks so fine, and praise and toast me at his wine.  
 "My father should wear a broadcloth coat; my brother should sail a painted boat.  
 "I'd dress my mother so grand and gay, and the baby should have a new toy each day.  
 "And I'd feed the hungry and clothe the poor, and all should bless me who left our door."  
 The Judge looked back as he climbed the hill, and saw Maud Muller standing still.  
 "A form more fair, a face more sweet, ne'er hath it been my lot to meet.  
 "And her modest answer and graceful air show her wise and good as she is fair.  
 "Would she were mine, and I to-day, like her, a harvester of hay:  
 "No doubtful balance of rights and wrongs, nor weary lawyers with endless tongues,  
 "But low of cattle and song of birds, and health and quiet and loving words."  
 But he thought of his sisters proud and cold, and his mother vain of her rank and gold.  
 So, closing his heart the Judge rode on and Maud was left in the field alone.  
 But the lawyers smiled that afternoon, when he hummed in Court an old love tune;  
 And the young girl mused beside the well till the rain on the unraked clover fell.  
 He wedded a wife of richest dower, who lived for fashion, as he for power.  
 Yet oft, in his marble hearth's bright glow, he watched a picture come and go;  
 And sweet Maud Muller's hazel eyes looked out in their innocent surprise.  
 Oft, when the wine in his glass was red, he longed for the wayside well instead;  
 And closed his eyes on his garnished rooms to dream of meadows and clover-blooms.  
 And the proud man sighed, with a secret pain, "Ah, that I was free again!  
 "Free as when I rode that day, where the barefoot maiden raked her hay."  
 She wedded a man unlearned and poor, and many children played round her door.  
 But care and sorrow, and childbirth pain, left their traces on heart and brain.  
 And oft, when the summer sun shone hot on the new-mown hay in the meadow lot,  
 And she heard the little spring brook fall over the road side, through the wail,  
 In the shade of the apple-tree again she saw a rider draw his rein.  
 And, gazing down with timid grace, she felt his pleased eyes read her face.  
 Sometimes her narrow kitchen walls stretched away into stately halls;  
 The weary wheel to a spinnet turned, the tallow candle an astral hurned,  
 And for him who sat by the chimney lug, dozing and grumbling o'er pipe and mug,  
 A manly form at her side she saw, and joy was duty and love was law.  
 Then she took up her burden of life again, saying only, "It might have been."  
 Alas for maiden, alas for Judge, for rich repiner and household drudge!  
 God pity them both! and pity us all, who vainly the dreams of youth recall.  
 For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: "It might have been."  
 Ah, well! for us all some sweet hope lies deeply buried from human eyes;  
 And, in the hereafter, angels may roll the stone from its grave away!

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